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ACADEMY'S SECOND SEAT

– 아카데미 차석이 되었다 –

- VOLUME 4 -

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[RAEI TRANSLATIONS]

CHAPTER 152
RAILER TERRITORY (1)

Awkward silence filled the air.

The only sound I could hear was the creaking of the carriage.

Robert, who was sleeping next to me, looked pitiful.

I lifted my head slightly and glanced ahead.

Luna was sitting across from me.

She had her arms crossed and was staring at me intently.

I couldn't bring myself to meet her gaze.

We were currently heading to the Railer Territory.

How did this happen?

This morning, as Robert had mentioned yesterday, I went to the laboratory.

Luna was there.

I wanted to flee.

What happened yesterday.

I tried to explain, but the misunderstanding wasn't completely cleared up.

It wasn’t a good situation.

With things like this, I couldn't just casually talk to Luna.

Of course, I knew that if I didn't speak, nothing would change.

But speaking to her right the next day was difficult.

So I tried to avoid going to the laboratory where Luna was.

I spotted Luna, but she hadn't noticed me yet.

Running away seemed like the best option.

"Where are you going?"

Just as I attempted to move, Professor Robert, who was behind me, grabbed the back of my collar.

I looked at Robert, who had detained me, with pleading eyes.

"I have… a real reason…”

Robert snorted at my response.

"What kind of reason…? Nevermind. You have to go anyway."

"Excuse me?"

"Go pack your things."

I stared at Robert, confused.

"We're heading to the Railer territory right now. Pack your stuff and meet me in front of the main building in 20 minutes."

And that's how I was 'kidnapped' by Professor Robert.

Actually, I felt positive about going somewhere with Professor Robert.

I thought that being away from the academy for a while to gather my thoughts would be good.

The issue was that the person accompanying us was Luna, and we were heading to her hometown, the Railer territory.

And now, silence.

Only the sounds of horseshoes and rolling wheels could be heard.

It felt as if I was walking on thin ice.

Luna just looked at me, saying nothing, while Robert fell asleep as soon as he got into the carriage, complaining of a hangover.

I try to gauge Luna's mood.

The usual warmth in her eyes was gone; they were cold.

Arms crossed, her expression seemed to say, 'If you have something to say, say it.'

In such a situation, who could open their mouth?

I had taken the initiative to confess something to Luna.

And in that situation, out of the blue, Rie came saying I was engaged to her.

Even if I had a hundred mouths, I wouldn't have an explanation.

If I were in her shoes, I'd be just as flabbergasted.

Of course, nothing was set in stone about the engagement.

It was just a topic of conversation for now, nothing definite.

Still, it weighed on my conscience.

Imagine how shocking it'd be if someone you liked suddenly announced they might marry your friend.

“……”

“Hmm……?”

I kept my head down, lost in thought.

“Ah……”

After a while, Robert woke up.

“I had a good sleep.”

Robert stretched lazily and alternated his gaze between the two of us.

“What's with this mood?”

“It's nothing……”

“…Yes, it's nothing.”

Luna responded as if taking a cue from my words.

Robert narrowed his eyes at us, then seemingly brushed it off with a shrug.

“Hey! How much longer?”

Robert shouted out the window.

He was addressing the coachman.

“We're almost at the Gotram territory!”

“…Gotram?”

As I looked confused, Robert explained.

“Going straight to the Railer territory would be too far, so we decided to stop at a territory on the way. I have someone to meet there too.”

I felt relieved hearing this.

Being in the carriage for so long was hellish.

Especially with Luna's icy stares and my reluctance to even speak.

“Thank you……”

“…? No need for thanks.”

“We'll arrive at the territory soon!”

I sighed with relief at the coachman's words.

‘Rudy is such an idiot.’

Luna grimaced and shot Rudy a glare.

Rudy said nothing, hanging his head as if he'd done something wrong.

Seeing him like that only added to Luna's frustration.

Normally, Rudy handled things straightforwardly, but he was always awkward when it came to matters involving women.

‘Damn it… seriously… ’

Luna brooded over the situation.

The carriage they were in entered Gotram territory.

Gotram wasn’t a particularly large territory.

It was just an average territory.

The most peculiar thing about it was its utter lack of peculiarities.

The carriage stopped at a moderately-sized inn in Gotram.

Theu all disembarked in front of the inn.

Upon stepping out, Rudy let out a sigh of relief, his face showing a hint of life.

“We can rest here for now. Rudy and I will stay in room 305, and Luna, you'll be in

306 alone.”

Robert tossed keys to Luna and Rudy.

“I have somewhere to be, so just relax. And don't get into trouble.”

With that, Robert left the inn.

Rudy, watching Robert leave, sneaked a glance at Luna.

Seeing this, Luna pursed her lips in annoyance.

"Annoying."

“…!”

"Why don't you say something? Did I ever tell you not to say anything?"

“…No, it's not like that."

"What's the matter? We're going to be together for a week, are you not going to talk to me the whole time?"

“…No.”

Luna stared at Rudy, who looked completely deflated.

This morning, Luna had been thrilled when Professor Robert said he'd be taking Rudy with him.

Even though something strange had happened yesterday, the news of a trip with just Rudy had been very exciting for Luna.

She had expected it to be a fun trip, but Rudy’s demeanor made her feel upset and frustrated.

Seeing Rudy looking so regretful and not saying anything was infuriating.

She actually wanted him to come out with confidence.

It was an incident caused by Rie and it wasn't actually a big deal.

How great it would be if he could just say that.

If he had, Luna might have been willing to forgive him.

However, Rudy did not show such an attitude.

"So, you're saying that's how it's going to be?"

Luna, seeming to have made up her mind, glared at Rudy as she spoke.

The incident caused by Rie.

It happened all of a sudden without any warning.

There was no reason why Luna couldn't do something like that.

Rie was the one who had crossed the line first.

“Rudy!”

Luna pointed her finger at Rudy.

Rudy looked at Luna with a puzzled expression.

“I'm going to make you fall in love with me by the time we go back to the academy.”

“What?”

“You'll be so into me that you won't even look at anyone else. So, be prepared!”

Though she spoke with confidence, Luna’s face gradually turned red.

“Ah…”

Rudy blankly stared at Luna.

Luna, with one hand on her hip, pointed at herself dramatically.

“Tr, try to resist! Try to fight it!”

With that, Luna turned to run into her room.

“Ah.”

But Luna paused, sneaking a glance back.

“Ac, actually, it might be better if you did fall for me. So, don’t resist too hard…”

With her face turning as red as a tomato, Luna shyly said this before rushing into her room.

“Rudy is gone?”

Astina had made a big resolution last night.

And now, Rudy was missing.

“Suddenly? How? Someone plotting something?”

“…It doesn't seem like that. I heard Professor Robert took him somewhere.”

Rie replied with a serious face.

Astina and Rie were in a very serious situation.

Both Luna and Rudy had disappeared.

The only information they had was that Professor Robert had taken them somewhere.

Neither the destination nor the reason for taking them was known.

Of course, Rie knew where the two had gone.

She had heard the story Robert told Luna while looking for Astina with her yesterday.

However, she cleverly hid this fact from Astina.

Astina was a formidable competitor.

There was no reason to provide her with such valuable information.

Astina, unaware, frowned.

"I'm finally here and Rudy disappears."

"What will you do?"

Rie, looking at Astina, spoke.

In her hand, she held a bag.

"Are you going to search for him?"

"If my husband disappeared with another woman, of course, I should follow."

Astina narrowed her eyes at Rie's confident demeanor.

"You're not even engaged yet, what do you mean 'husband'?"

"Ah, anyway. He's my husband! Don't you dare look down on me!"

Rie proudly stated, showing no embarrassment about calling him her husband.

Astina didn’t like it, but she didn’t comment further.

"Hmm…”

Astina pondered.

Should she go with Rie to find Rudy?

She had no information.

All she knew was that Luna and Rudy had been taken.

They deliberately didn't tell anyone, to the point where even Borval, who was closest to Robert, didn't know where he went.

"Where are you going then?"

"Why, are you going to follow me?"

Rie glared at Astina.

"No, I'll go separately."

"Separately?"

Rie was surprised to hear that Astina was going separately.

In fact, if Astina were to follow, she had prepared several strategies to shake her off.

'I guess it's better this way?'

Rie laughed inwardly at Astina's words.

She knew where Luna and Rudy had gone, but Astina didn't.

"Well then, I'll go ahead."

Astina waved her hand to Rie.

"Sure, I hope we don't meet."

"I hope the same Astina~."

Rie made a "tch-" sound, sticking her tongue out playfully as she walked away.

Watching Rie’s retreating figure, Astina murmured to herself.

"Then let's search."

CHAPTER 153
RAILER TERRITORY (2)

"Man, what a day!"

"Here, bring me a pint of lager!"

The tavern buzzed with activity.

Though it wasn't very spacious, it was filled with people.

This wasn't your average tavern.

It also served as a gathering place for mercenaries, so it was bustling with mercenaries who had just finished their jobs.

Into this establishment walked a man.

While his clothes were tidy, the sparse and unkempt beard he sported didn’t make him stand out amongst the mercenaries.

He walked slowly and took a seat at the counter.

"What can I get you?"

As he settled into his seat, a young girl approached and asked him.

"A pint of lager and call the owner over."

"Pardon?"

The girl looked puzzled at his request.

This place was a gathering place for mercenaries.

If he was asking for the owner, he was essentially asking for the master of this place.

This wasn't someone who'd just come out because he was asked.

"Um… I'm not sure if I can get the master to…"

"You don't have to force him to come. Just tell him Robert is here."

The girl eyed Robert up and down.

His attire seemed somewhat upscale, but he himself didn't look too impressive.

He gave off the aura of an ordinary man.

If she wanted to call the owner, she could.

However, she wasn't the type of person who would call the owner for someone she didn't even know.

Would the owner move just because someone called him, without knowing their identity?

'Drunkard, perhaps?'

Yet he seemed too sober for that.

After some thought, the girl remembered the name Robert.

Among mercenaries, Robert was a name one couldn't possibly not know.

A demon who masked his face and dominated the battlefield.

Despite possessing immense magical abilities, he acted as a mercenary.

This legendary figure hid his identity and always remained behind a mask.

Before his true identity was revealed.

The owner occasionally spoke of him.

He claimed to be friends with Robert, but no one ever believed him.

Everyone dismissed it as the owner's drunken nonsense.

The problem was that because of the owner's words, there were people who occasionally came pretending to be Robert.

The girl briefly looked at him, then turned away.

‘He must be another imposter.’

"I'll pass on the message for now…”

Robert didn't respond.

The girl gave Robert another glance before moving on, not to fetch the owner, but to continue her tavern duties.

After Luna made her bold declaration.

She sat in her room, hugging a pillow, lost in thought.

"Oh, what have I done…”

Just what kind of confidence did she have to say such a thing?

Luna gripped her head and screamed.

Although she had declared it so confidently, Luna hadn't really prepared anything.

Without anyone like Ena nearby, there's no one to ask for love advice.

She had to figure it out on her own.

"How could I possibly charm Rudy…”

She had nothing.

When Ena offered her a love potion, she should have accepted it.

"No… What's the point of relying on something like that?"

She wanted Rudy to like her for who she is, not for superficial reasons.

Luna shook her head several times and looked out the window.

Smoke rose from the chimneys, and the sunset painted the horizon.

It was the calm atmosphere of a peaceful city.

Though there were many people for a rural domain, it wouldn't be considered bustling.

It felt similar to the atmosphere of other domains near the Railer territory that could be called cities.

"At least I know a bit about a place like this…"

She could take the lead when going on a date.

It meant she could naturally take Rudy along with her.

However, Luna didn't think of it as something anyone could do.

After daydreaming about her date with Rudy, Luna clenched her fists.

"Yes, let's be bold. Really bold."

Luna immediately got up from her seat and headed towards Rudy's room.

"Rudy, hello…"

When Luna knocked, Rudy came out.

"Oh, uh… Luna?"

Rudy greeted her with a seemingly flustered face.

It hadn't been long since Luna declared,

'I'm going to make you fall in love with me!'

Having made such a declaration and then immediately coming to see him must have surprised him.

"Well… we should… have dinner, right?"

"Yes?"

"Why don't we go out instead of eating at the inn? Just a quick stroll around…"

After pondering for a moment, Rudy nodded.

Seeing Rudy's agreement, Luna broke into a broad smile.

"Then, in 20 minutes! Let's meet in front of the inn!"

"Okay, I'll change my clothes and come out."

It hadn't been long since they entered the room, so they were still in their school uniforms.

Walking around in uniforms would draw too much attention.

Academy students were always the center of attention, so changing was a good idea.

With that, Luna returned to her room and looked at the clothes she had laid out on her bed.

"Will this do?"

It was an outfit she had prepared before going to Rudy's room.

It wasn't flashy, but it was a pretty dress.

It was perfect to showcase Luna's cuteness and innocence.

"Yes! I'll give it a try!"

Luna nodded and muttered to herself.

Quickly changing, Luna immediately went to the front of the inn.

Maybe because she changed so fast, Rudy wasn't out yet.

"Phew…"

Luna, who always took appointment times seriously, let out a sigh of relief.

However, she suddenly remembered what Ena had said.

A promise with a man is always 10 minutes late.

She said a woman's charm was in playing hard to get.

"Ah…"

Luna recalled those words and let out a regretful sigh.

"Should I… go back in?"

As she pondered this and took a step towards the door, she saw Rudy descending the stairs.

She couldn't go in now.

The inn was small, and there was only one staircase.

There was no other entrance.

"I… I should hide first!"

Luna spotted a small patch of bushes next to the inn.

They were short bushes.

Quickly, Luna moved to hide in them.

Once inside, a concern crossed her mind.

"How do I get out from here?"

She had agreed to meet Rudy in front of the inn and now she was hiding right there in the bushes.

If she came out of the bushes, she'd surely be seen by Rudy.

She couldn’t let that happen.

She couldn't show such a pathetic sight when she was supposed to display her charm.

Luna swiftly emerged from the bushes.

“Ah.”

“Huh?”

As she bolted out, Rudy was right there in front of her.

The two locked eyes and stood in stunned silence.

Luna was wearing a dress adorned with pretty floral patterns, but in her rush from the bushes, leaves had gotten caught in her hair and on her dress.

Rudy, alternating his gaze between the flowers and leaves, rubbed his chin and said,

“…Decorations?"

“No, not at all!”

At Rudy's comment, Luna brushed off her dress.

“I dropped something in the bushes and went to pick it up!”

Luna said this, thinking it was a good excuse.

At that, Rudy smirked mischievously.

“What did you drop?”

"W-What did I drop?"

Luna was caught off guard by the unexpected question.

“Um… well…”

She couldn't answer and just shifted her eyes around.

She hadn't brought anything that she could've dropped.

She didn’t need to bring money since Professor Robert had given it to Rudy, and the only valuable she had was her magic book, which she had placed in her small bag.

She was wearing the bag over her shoulder, so she couldn’t have dropped it.

While Luna was deep in thought, Rudy chuckled.

“Why were you hiding there?”

Rudy brushed the leaves off Luna's hair.

Luna stared intently at him.

Rudy was wearing clothes that seemed too lavish to be ordinary but didn't have the boots that nobles usually wore.

However, anyone could tell he was of noble birth by looking at his face and hair.

Seeing Rudy in different attire than usual and brushing off her clothes made Luna’s face turn increasingly red.

“Uh…”

Luna lowered her head, trying to hide her flushed face.

Rudy gently tapped Luna’s head and spoke up.

"I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

With that, the two walked into town and entered a nearby restaurant.

They didn't go in with a specific place in mind but simply chose the one that looked

the most appealing in the area.

Since they had Professor Robert's money anyway, they wanted to eat the best.

"Rudy, what will you have?"

"Um… I don’t really mind, anything is fine."

"In that case! I'll have this pasta, and would you like a steak?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to taste both! We can share!"

Luna said with a chuckle.

Her plan was simple.

Order two dishes, then when she wants to try Rudy's food, she would ask him to feed her.

Or, she could feed her dish to Rudy.

If either of the two scenarios played out, she would consider it a win.

"Excuse me."

However, Rudy, having had a similar experience with Rie before, spoke up.

"I'll have one sirloin steak and this pasta here…”

Rudy sneaked a glance at Luna before continuing.

“…And could you bring us individual plates for sharing? Like two sets of tableware."

“…What?"

Luna stared in surprise.

"Yes, understood. We'll get it ready right away."

"Oh, no…”

Luna stammered, prompting the server to look at her curiously.

"Is there a problem?"

"Um…”

It wasn’t like she could ask them to prepare only one set of tableware now.

"No, it's okay…”

Looking a bit dejected, Luna watched the server leave.

"So, what's the matter?"

Rudy teased with a playful grin.

"You… You did that on purpose!"

"You said to resist, so I thought I’d resist as best I could."

"I said it'd be better if you did fall for me…”

Luna murmured shyly.

A short while later, they finished their meal and left the restaurant.

"You could have let me feed you just once!"

"No."

"Ugh…”

Luna was fervently protesting to Rudy.

She hadn’t even expected Rudy to feed her the steak or pasta.

She just wanted to try feeding him once.

However, Rudy rejected the idea, dodging her attempts with determination.

Rudy was firm in his refusal.

He said if she could charm him, he'd let her feed him a hundred times, but until she did, it was a no-go.

"You're so mean…”

Luna muttered, glaring at Rudy, when suddenly -

CLANK!

"Hm?"

"Huh?"

A loud noise echoed nearby.

It sounded like something had been shattered.

The sudden noise captured the attention of the peaceful town's residents.

"What was that?"

Both Luna and Rudy moved towards the source of the sound.

It came from a tavern.

People were rushing out of the tavern, and loud noises continued from within.

Crash—

"Ah, there's someone inside…”

"Watch out!"

The voices of the people around sounded panicky, but the situation didn’t seem that

dangerous.

The building wasn't on fire, and the walls weren't broken down.

There was just a loud noise coming from inside.

"You've grown quite a bit, haven't you?"

Then, a voice echoed from within.

Upon hearing it, Rudy and Luna exchanged glances.

"This voice…"

"…Sounds like Professor Robert."

Having said that, the two slowly walked into the building.

"Hey, kids! If you go in there…!"

Someone tried to dissuade them from entering.

However, they paid no mind.

Having gone through countless battles, they didn't feel much danger from a situation like this.

As they entered, the intact interior of a tavern was in sight.

Apart from some chairs knocked over by people evacuating, there wasn't much damage to the tables or other areas as one might have expected.

"What's going on?"

Rudy said so and looked up at the second floor.

Since the first floor had a clear view of the second floor, they could see it just by raising their heads.

There stood Professor Robert, pinning a sturdy-looking man beneath his feet.

Despite the man's imposing build, he was unable to take any action and could only struggle beneath Robert's feet.

“…Professor, what are you doing?"

Rudy asked with a baffled expression.

"Oh, is that you, Rudy?"

Robert responded while adjusting his sleeves.

"Just disciplining this guy a bit. You can head back to the inn first."

"Please, please spare me!!"

The man below let out a loud scream.

CHAPTER 154
RAILER TERRITORY (3)

The Mercenary Guild typically serves as a bridge between mercenaries and others in need of their services.

If a task is entrusted to the Mercenary Guild, they match the job with a suitable mercenary who's currently available.

It was a beneficial arrangement for both the person assigning the task and the mercenaries themselves.

However, the commission taken by the guild was quite a lot.

It was often said that while the mercenaries did the work, the guild took the money.

The reason the guild could operate and take such a high commission was due to the masters of the Mercenary Guild.

Each region has its own master of the Mercenary Guild, and these masters are highly skilled.

They are usually the top mercenaries who have made a name for themselves in that region.

The master of a region's Mercenary Guild is not someone to be trifled with.

They have the backing of the guild, wield significant influence in their region, and possess formidable personal power, making them untouchable even by the nobility.

So, it was no wonder that people fled when Robert hit one of these masters.

"I apologize…"

The master of the Mercenary Guild, with his swollen face, was apologizing to Robert.

He was so badly beaten that his original facial features were hardly recognizable.

Robert, flexing his wrist, began to speak.

"You've grown arrogant."

The master coughed in response.

Here's what happened:

Robert called for the master and was downstairs having a drink.

Somehow, a mix-up occurred, and the message never reached the master.

He then personally went to see the master.

The master's room was on the second floor of a bar.

Robert boldly walked up and knocked on the master's door.

However, the master treated him like an impostor and hurled insults at him.

That's when Robert lost his temper.

"What's the history between you two?" I asked.

"Worthless scum."

"W-Worthless scum…? Weren't we comrades?"

"What else do you call someone who just carried my luggage and followed me around from behind?"

The man, known as the master, couldn't respond to Robert's words.

"When did Professor Robert associate with such people…"

"Wait… Robert, you became a professor?"

Robert gave the master a cold stare.

The master quickly covered his mouth with his hand.

Robert turned away,

"I had some wandering years. I got involved with these types."

I didn't ask any further and kept my mouth shut.

Perhaps this was before he joined the academy?

I heard that before Professor Cromwell brought him to the academy, Robert had quite an eventful past.

Robert turned his attention back to the master.

"Jack, you have a task to do."

"A task?"

"Find someone for me."

Robert threw a scroll he was holding to the man named Jack.

"Find out by tomorrow night."

Jack unfolded the scroll Robert had thrown to him.

"This, by tomorrow night? Ah, no, I can't do it. Besides, I'd go to jail for doing this!"

"So, you're more afraid of jail than me now?"

"Hmm…"

Jack covered his mouth with his hand again.

He was a large man, but he couldn't move a muscle out of fear.

"Well, why don't you come inside and talk for now…"

Jack said this and then looked outside.

"Ahem! Business ends here for today! An important guest has arrived, so I'm closing the shop!"

Jack shouted outside with a dignified attitude, different from when he was dealing with Robert.

People were puzzled, but seeing the master saying so, they figured it must be the case and started to leave.

"By the way… who are you?"

"Oh, we are disciples of Professor Robert."

"Disciples? He took in disciples?"

Jack looked at Robert with a bewildered face.

"They're just some guys I taught a few spells under me."

“…Isn’t that called a disciple?"

Robert then gave him a sharp look.

Avoiding Robert's gaze, Jack looked at us.

"Ahem, well, you guys come in too."

With that, we entered the room of the Mercenary Guild Master.

Jack opened the scroll Robert had given him on the desk.

The content written on the scroll was related to investigating Ephomos.

"Do you not realize that investigating matters related to Ephomos is illegal?"

"That's why I asked you. Mercenaries like you might know better."

Ephomos.

A city underground known as the underbelly of the capital.

The empire's capital is highly sophisticated and beautifully decorated.

People dress well, and it's so clean that not a single piece of trash can be found.

The reason for its maintenance is the existence of this underground city.

Ephomos was once an underground city where the poor of the capital lived.

Because of this city, the empire faced headaches.

With Ephomos around, public order in the capital deteriorated, and the poor, protecting each other, made it harder to catch criminals.

During such troubling times, the empire discovered something.

Dark Wizards in Ephomos were researching necromancy.

In the end, the empire used that as an excuse to wipe out Ephomos entirely.

"How do you research a vanished city now… The empire should have all the related materials."

"The empire doesn't have the materials."

“…What?"

"I went to the empire myself and asked people of the empire to investigate, but all the materials are gone."

Hearing this, my eyes widened.

"I have a rough idea who might have done it…”

Robert said, sneaking a glance at me.

The Astria family?

Why would they?

Although I was puzzled, I continued to listen.

"The Empire has only just realized the data is missing and is frantically searching for it. You should look into it as well."

"How am I supposed to find something even the Empire can't?"

"Mercenaries will do anything for the right price, won't they?"

Robert took out a pouch and threw it to Jack.

Thud—

The pouch landed heavily on the desk.

Jack looked at Robert as if questioning what it was.

Robert casually replied,

"Gold coins."

"Excuse me?"

Even though it was a small pouch, it was larger than a grown man's fist.

If it was filled with gold coins, there would be at least a hundred or more.

An amount that would strain even the nobility, and for commoners, it was enough to live comfortably for a lifetime.

"That amount should suffice, right?"

“…Leave it to me, Sir. I, Jack, will do my utmost to find out!"

Seeing the amount, Jack hastily stood up and said that.

However, he quickly changed his expression to a more pleading one, glancing around.

"But… one day might be too tough… Can I have some more time…?"

"Alright, 5 days."

He probably intended to give him 5 days from the start.

It would be enough time for us to visit the Railer Territory.

He said it as if he was showing mercy.

"I will serve you faithfully!!!"

Jack replied with a loud voice overflowing with gratitude.

"So… who are you two?"

Jack sat in front of Luna and me, asking.

Robert sat on the other side of the room, eating his meal.

While we had already eaten, Robert hadn't, so he was eating separately.

"We're academy students."

"Ahaha…"

"Students? So, you use magic, handle elementals, and such?"

"Yes, we're from the magic department, so we know how to use magic."

There's no need to mention Priscilla…

It didn't seem like he was asking out of genuine curiosity.

It felt more like a casual question, so I kept my answer brief.

"Wow! So, you'll probably become nobles in the future. But shouldn't you be studying? Is it okay to roam around like this?"

"It's our vacation, so we have some free time. Our teacher wanted us to go, what could we possibly say against it?"

"Oh… Your circumstances seem similar to mine."

Jack looked at us with a sympathetic gaze.

"To be under someone like that at such a young age… But still, he's become much milder compared to before."

Jack said, looking up as if reminiscing.

I didn't miss that and immediately spoke up.

"How was Professor Robert in the past?"

That was precisely what I had been curious about.

Even if I asked professors like Robert or Cromwell, they never answered this question.

But this Jack person seemed like he would spill everything if he got a little excited.

"Heh… Back in the day, Professor Robert was like a real devil… No, he summoned demons, so he was a devil, right?"

"Oh? How long have you known Professor Robert?"

"Professor Robert? Maybe… since he was expelled from the empire?"

Upon hearing that, my eyes widened in surprise.

They've known each other for quite some time, haven't they?

I thought they might have met once or twice, but this was unexpected.

"Thinking back to those times… I was quite brave."

Jack shivered, making a face as if recalling something terrifying.

"But, back then, even Professor Robert was young… and so was I."

"Hmm… I see…"

"Did I say something weird in front of the kids? Heh heh…"

Jack got lost in his memories for a moment, then laughed it off.

Seeing him like this, he didn't seem like a bad person.

"But seeing him take on a disciple, he has changed a lot… Back in the day…"

"You talk too much."

Professor Robert interjected while eating, glancing back slightly.

This was a chance to learn Robert's secret, and it was a bit disappointing.

How much does this man hide about himself?

I could understand to some extent, but it was frustrating as someone close to him.

"Hmm. Let's talk about something else then. Right, I didn't catch your names. What are your names?"

At Jack's question, Luna and I exchanged glances.

This was a tricky question.

It would be better not to reveal our names if we wanted information from Jack…

"So, what's the name of the pretty one here?"

"Uh… I'm Luna Railer…"

"Hmm…?"

Jack furrowed his brows upon hearing Luna's name.

"What? You're a noble, aren't you?"

"Ahaha… I'm just a noble in name."

"Where can you find a noble who is just a noble in name? If you're a noble, then you're a noble."

Jack commented, stroking his chin.

"Railer? Are you from that region?"

"Yes… it's a countryside territory…"

"Ah, that place… Hmm…"

I tilted my head, curious about his reaction.

What was the status of the Railer territory to elicit such a response?

I had a rough idea since it was a rural area, but I wondered how low of a level.

Jack then turned his gaze to me.

"So, what about you?"

"Rudy… Just call me Rudy."

I deliberately left out my family name.

It would be awkward for both of us if the name 'Astria' suddenly came up.

"Rudy? Hmm… Not a very masculine name, but it suits you nonetheless."

"Ahaha… Thank you."

"But you seem to be quite athletic! Your physique is quite manly!"

Jack playfully punched me as he commented.

"Did you work out to protect your girlfriend?"

"No, not really…"

"What do you mean, 'not really'? Especially with such a pretty girlfriend."

Jack gestured towards Luna standing next to me.

At that, Luna's expression brightened.

"Are you shy? This is the moment to score points with your girlfriend! Just say you worked out because of her."

"No… It's not like that…”

"Do we look good together?"

Suddenly, Luna, with sparkling eyes, asked Jack.

"Oh, um? Yes, you both are a perfect match!"

Luna smiled slyly and looked at me.

"Rudy, we look good together."

"…”

I responded with an awkward smile to Luna's statement.

"Well, let's get going."

At that moment, Robert stood up to speak.

Jack also rose, bowing his head at a 90-degree angle.

"Then, until next time."

Robert looked at Jack and then at me.

"Hmm…”

Seeing no response from Robert, Jack lifted his head slightly to look at him.

"Do you have something to say?"

Robert hesitated for a moment before moving away.

"It's okay. I'm leaving."

"Yes! Take care!"

Receiving a hearty farewell from Jack, we exited the store.

The next morning.

Knock, knock—

There was a knocking sound at the door.

"Ugh… What now?"

I sat up and looked beside me.

Robert, who should have been sleeping on the adjacent bed, was nowhere in sight.

Knock, knock, knock—

Another series of knocks echoed.

"Ahem. Who is it?"

Still groggy from sleep, I cleared my throat and shouted.

"Open the door."

“…Yes?"

"Open it, Rudy Astria."

"…”

An authoritative, commanding tone.

A woman's voice.

Slowly, I got up and opened the door.

"Why are you here…?"

Outside stood Astina.

CHAPTER 155
RAILER TERRITORY (4)

“Ugh…”

“Mm~ This food is delicious.”

There were four people at the table, having breakfast.

Luna was eating, her demeanor much like that of a frightened puppy.

Opposite her sat Astina.

Robert and I alternated glances between the two as we ate our own meals.

Seeing this, Robert quietly asked me,

“What exactly happened here?”

I could only respond with an awkward smile.

Astina had suddenly shown up.

I wonder how she had managed to find us.

Even when I asked Astina how, she only smiled without giving an answer.

"This… shouldn't be happening…”

"Hmm~? What's wrong, Luna?"

“…Ugh. It's nothing."

At Astina’s question, Luna looked disheartened.

Though she had declared her intentions to charm me during the trip, Astina's sudden

appearance seemed to have thrown her plans into disarray.

Professor Robert observed Astina in silence for a moment before speaking.

“Astina, it doesn't matter that you've come, but I won't be providing you with meals, accommodation, or transportation.”

Though Robert spoke firmly, Astina merely responded with a slight smile.

“That's fine. I didn't come expecting any of that.”

Saying so, Astina cast a fleeting glance my way.

"Is everyone ready then?"

We nodded in response to Robert's question.

Two carriages stood before us.

One was for Luna, Robert, and myself.

The other, parked a distance away, was the one Astina had arranged for herself.

“Alright, get on.”

With Robert's words, I got into the carriage.

As I took my seat, Luna also entered.

“Hmm?”

Luna then moved closer to me.

As I looked at her in confusion, she simply took the seat next to me without a word.

“Luna?”

In response, Luna snuggled up to me, holding onto my sleeve.

“Why…?”

She looked at me as if questioning what the problem was.

“…Never mind.”

It seemed she wanted to make some kind of move, given that Astina wasn’t in this carriage.

But then…

“…?”

Robert climbed into the carriage and looked in our direction.

For some reason, Luna was snuggled up right next to me.

“Hmm.”

“Ugh…”

When Robert stared intently, Luna, perhaps feeling a bit embarrassed, shifted a little away from me.

There was no way Luna could do anything when Robert was in the carriage with us.

Luna was already quite shy even in front of me, so how could she openly cling to me in front of Professor Robert?

Robert observed the two of us for a moment before taking a seat opposite us and starting a conversation.

"Should I get off?"

"Oh, no! That's…”

As Robert spoke, Luna extended her hand and said.

Her face reddened and looked unsure of what to do.

Still, she pouted her lips and looked at me with a disappointed expression.

Her eyes hinted that she might do something even in Robert's presence.

It was a gaze like that of a predator eying its prey.

While Luna might be looking at me with such intentions, to me, it just looked like an innocent puppy giving me a threatening look.

I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Let's set off."

"Understood!"

With Robert's words, the carriage began to move.

As time slowly passed,

The carriage started to shake heavily.

The roads near the academy were reasonably well-maintained, so it didn't shake this much, but as we approached the Railer territory, the carriage's shakes intensified.

Just how underdeveloped was this place…

I was both concerned and excited.

The places I had seen so far were more developed areas like the capital and the academy.

The capital and the academy were in an excellent state due to magic.

So it felt slightly different from the typical fantasy feeling.

Of course, I had been to the north and other places, but I hadn’t been to the outskirts of the kingdom, so I couldn't experience that feeling.

Aren't these rural villages the real essence of a fantasy world?

A village that truly gives off a fantasy vibe.

Most of the people were farmers, and it was a small territory without even a proper castle.

The thought made me anticipate even more.

The carriage shook.

Thud-

Luna's head touched my shoulder.

Turning my head, I saw Luna, who earlier was staring with an intense gaze, now sound asleep.

Sleeping with an innocent, childlike face.

Why on earth is this girl trying to make me fall for her?

But, looking at Luna's innocent actions, my heart was inexplicably moved.

Seeing Luna's innocent actions always swayed my heart.

She acts determined when she needs to be, but when I see her innocence in her daily life, I always find myself unknowingly smiling.

Not that Luna knows about it.

"Umm…"

Luna seemed uncomfortable in her position and shifted.

She leaned more comfortably against my shoulder and soon gave a satisfied smile.

I gently brushed her hair aside, thinking it might tickle her.

That's when Robert, who was in front of me, spoke.

"What will you do?"

"I thought you were sleeping…”

"Are you just going to leave them like this?"

I couldn't answer Robert's question.

Unable to respond, I just looked away.

"Tsk tsk… you're so indecisive."

Robert clicked his tongue and folded his arms in annoyance.

I didn't expect him to be paying attention to us like this.

For someone who seemed so indifferent about everything, I assumed he would just ignore it.

Yet, it looks like he knows more about the situation than I thought.

Wasn't it Robert who advised me to pay close attention to my surroundings last time?

Robert stared at me for a moment before speaking.

“When you're learning dark magic or making other decisions, you act decisively. Why do you hesitate now?”

"Wouldn't my choice hurt someone else?"

"Do you not realize that by dragging this out, you could cause even greater harm?"

I couldn't argue against his words.

Certainly, making a choice now might be better for everyone involved.

Choosing now, even if it's late, could minimize the pain.

But I felt like things have already gone too far.

Their feelings and mine were already deeply intertwined.

“Rudy Astria.”

As I was lost in thought, Robert spoke seriously.

“There's a good law for you in the empire.”

“A good law?”

As I tilted my head in confusion, Robert nodded.

“Polygamy.”

“Excuse me?”

“The empire allows polygamy.”

“Professor?”

“What would you do after chasing after several rabbits? You can't let them all slip away. The only option is to catch them all.”

Robert clenched his fist.

“If you leave things as they are, they might end up fighting amongst themselves. You need to take action.”

I just stared at Robert blankly.

Robert nodded several times as if understanding everything.

“It's surely a difficult path! But what can you do? Give it your best shot!”

“Luna.”

“Mm… Yes?”

“Luna, wake up.”

“Huh…?”

Slowly opening her eyes to the sound of her name, Luna saw Rudy right in front of her.

“Eek!”

She exclaimed in surprise and backed away.

‘What's happening? What's this?’

She was confused.

Luna had been deep in thought.

With Professor Robert in front, she had been thinking about what could be done in such a confined space.

Though she was thrilled just by being close to Rudy, it wasn't enough.

‘Should I link arms with Rudy…?’

‘Perhaps sneakily hold his hand without Professor Robert noticing?’

Luna had all sorts of wild thoughts.

However she had fallen asleep.

Luna had stayed up the previous night, devising plans to charm Rudy.

After exams, the rocking of the carriage and her lack of sleep, she couldn't help but drift off.

The problem was Luna's current situation.

"Luna, we're almost there."

At Rudy's words, Luna cautiously looked at his shoulder.

Wondering if she drooled in her sleep, or if her head was too heavy on his shoulder, or if she had sleep-talked and said something strange.

Many worries flitted through her mind.

'Oh no!!!'

She had already felt threatened by the sudden appearance of Astina.

'I made such a mistake…!'

Luna thought it fortunate that Astina hadn't boarded the carriage with them.

However, when such an opportunity was given, instead of seizing the moment, she fell asleep.

“…Rudy."

"Hmm?"

"Did I… do anything weird? Like…”

"Like?"

“…you know."

Rudy then chuckled.

It was a laugh as if finding her behavior amusing.

Seeing Luna's puzzled face, Rudy placed his hand on her head.

"You slept peacefully. Don't worry."

Luna felt the warmth of Rudy's gentle touch on her head.

It was even more affectionate and warm than usual.

Relieved by Rudy's words, Luna let out a sigh and laughed.

"We're almost there, so get ready to disembark."

"Ah! Really?"

Luna looked out the window.

This was Railer territory.

Her hometown.

A farming landscape spread out, and mountains were visible in the distance.

Seeing the familiar and comforting view, Luna brightened up.

It had been about a year since she last visited her territory due to her studies at the academy.

Although she hadn't come here of her own volition, she had missed it.

Looking outside, Rudy then turned to Luna, smiling.

"It's beautiful."

"Right?"

At Rudy's comment, Luna beamed.

CHAPTER 156
RAILER TERRITORY (5)

The Railer Territory exceeded my expectations.

It had a distinct countryside feel.

The surrounding mountains and fields swayed in the wind, and I could see farmers resting under the shade of trees.

It was the very essence of a peaceful, tranquil countryside.

Our carriage continued deeper into the Railer lands.

The territory itself didn't have that feel overly rural feel.

Houses were clustered closely, but there seemed to be all the essential shops.

However, this wasn’t the most noticeable aspect.

"Why is the atmosphere like this?"

Before entering the village, the fields gave off a very tranquil atmosphere.

There was hardly any noise except for the wind and the occasional chatter of a few people.

"Right? The village is a bit noisy."

Luna, also feeling something was off, looked outside.

Outside the carriage, people appeared to be tidying up.

The ground was scattered with flowers, and various ornaments adorned the village.

The villagers were busy organizing these decorations.

Luna tilted her head and remarked,

"Did someone important visit?"

"What do you mean?"

When I asked, Luna began to explain slowly.

"Whenever someone of high stature visits our territory, we have done such things a few times. Not just any high-ranking person, but someone very influential…"

However, it didn't feel like they were preparing to welcome us.

They had already used the flowers and ornaments and were now cleaning up.

"We'll understand once we go in."

The carriage moved forward, stopping in front of the largest mansion in the village.

Even though it was a countryside village, the mansion was as pristine as those in the capital.

It likely belonged to the Railer family, who governed this territory.

True to an aristocratic mansion, there were fences and an exterior garden.

Everything seemed a downscaled version of mansions in the capital, but it still screamed 'noble mansion'.

As the carriage came to a stop, we stepped out.

Noticing the carriage's stop, a butler rushed out from the mansion towards us.

"Who might you be?"

Approaching us, his eyes widened upon seeing Luna.

"…Lady Luna?"

"Oh! Alfredo! It's been so long!!"

Luna greeted the butler, clearly delighted to see him.

"What brings you here? You came without any notice!"

"Hehe, I have some business!"

Luna and Alfredo, the butler, engaged in cheerful conversation.

Meanwhile, I turned to look at Robert.

"Professor, did you really come here without telling them?"

The courtesies between nobles.

Before arriving, it’s customary to notify the host so they can prepare.

It gives the host time to arrange a proper reception.

Regardless of how noble a family was, there was a difference in the state of cleanliness and the overall condition of the house when they were receiving guests and when they weren't.

It was a basic courtesy.

Unless they were very close friends, one shouldn't visit in such a manner.

Robert then spoke with a nonchalant expression,

"I am not a noble."

“…I am."

"Then did you come here without sending notice?"

Robert looked at me sternly, making a tsking noise.

I looked back at him in disbelief.

“…Haah."

I walked towards the butler, who was with Luna.

Upon seeing me approach, the butler asked Luna in a low voice,

"Who is this gentleman?"

I offered the butler a polite greeting,

"I am Rudy Astria, the second son of the Astria family. I apologize for visiting unexpectedly."

"You are Rudy?"

Alfredo looked at me with wide eyes.

I felt something odd about his reaction.

Was he surprised not because of the Astria family name but because of the name 'Rudy'?

It felt strange, but I continued,

"Well, our professor didn't send any notice. I apologize for the inconvenience."

I sighed with a hint of embarrassment.

"Oh… You can come in. We are already prepared, mainly because of Princess Rie."

"What? Rie?"

I looked at Alfredo in confusion.

"Princess Rie stayed at the mansion just a moment ago. She was looking for Lady Luna and Sir Rudy."

The opulent decorations in the village, and the residents who were cleaning up, were all because of Rie?

"Wait, why did Rie come here?"

"I'm not sure… She simply stayed for a day while searching for Sir Rudy and Lady Luna."

Did Rie travel all the way to the Railer territory while we were in the Gotram territory?

I had predicted Astina might come, but I never thought Rie would reach Railer territory first.

I don't know when Rie left the academy, but if she came straight to Railer territory, she must have had a long journey.

"Do we need to go find her?"

"Yes… We probably should."

It's absurd that a princess of a nation is roaming around looking for someone.

"In that case, I'll send notifications to the neighboring territories."

"…Thank you, that would be helpful."

The butler gave an awkward smile and then looked at Robert standing behind me.

"Are there three of you?"

The butler seemed to inquire about the number of people for accommodation purposes.

"No, there are four of us…"

As I said that, I noticed a carriage approaching from the distance.

"Ah… then who is that person?"

The butler looked at me as if he intended to report to Luna's parents.

"That's Astina Persia. You might recognize her from the Persia Viscount family."

"…"

Upon hearing the name, Alfredo frowned and stared intently at Luna.

"Young lady… causing such a fuss all of a sudden…"

"It's, it's not a fuss! They're just friends! There's no need for a grand preparation!"

After a brief moment of chaos.

"The mansion looks better than I expected, Luna. It shows that care was put into it."

"Hahaha… Thank you."

We proceeded into the mansion.

Astina glanced around with a satisfied smile.

"Many places in the capital don't maintain this level of care. Your parents must really pay attention to the details."

"Is that so? I think they might have tidied up after Rie visited…"

"This doesn't look like a rush job. It's probably the result of consistent care and effort from the staff."

Astina was right.

If a mansion isn't regularly maintained, it becomes a mess.

Right after I was reincarnated, I noticed that the Astria mansion, particularly my room, was a total mess.

Neither the servants nor Rudy Astria himself seemed to care about maintaining it.

Of course, I didn't fully realize this at first.

It's a fact I learned after seeing many other mansions.

"Luna, you should be proud. This speaks volumes about how well your parents treat

their staff and how diligently they uphold the values of nobility."

Values of nobility.

Astina was refering to setting a noble example and maintaining dignity even in the rural territories.

"Th-thank you."

Seemingly flattered by Astina's compliment, Luna shyly lowered her head.

"By the way, is this the dining room?"

"Yes, it is. Shall we go in?"

Luna opened the door, and we entered.

Inside, a middle-aged man and woman sat at a dining table.

"Welcome. Luna's friends and… you said a professor, right? Pleased to meet you. I'm Luna's mother."

"I'm Luna's father."

Luna's mother bore such a striking resemblance to Luna that no introduction was needed.

Despite appearing somewhat older, her beauty hadn't faded in the slightest.

Compared to Luna, her father did not resemble her at all.

He was a somewhat muscular man with a solemn demeanor.

His aura was quite different from Luna's lively one.

He exuded a noble's dignity and had his own charisma.

Then, Robert stepped forward and greeted Luna's parents.

"I am Robert, in charge of dark magic at the academy. I apologize for visiting without

notice."

Robert greeted them with a courteous demeanor.

"Pleased to meet you, Professor Robert."

Luna's father nodded sternly in response, then turned to look at us.

Astina was the first to speak.

"I am Astina Persia, the successor of the Persia Viscount family."

"I've just heard from the butler. Rest well during your stay."

Luna's father exchanged the necessary pleasantries and then turned his gaze to me.

It felt as though his attention was focused more on me than the entire group.

Just like Robert and Astina, I greeted him with formal courtesy.

"Hello, I am Rudy Astria, the second son of the Astria family."

I placed my hand over my chest and slightly bowed my head in greeting.

However, there was no response from him.

It's considered rude if one does not acknowledge a greeting, so I held my posture for a moment before slightly raising my head.

That's when I noticed Luna's father staring intently at me.

"Hmm…"

He continued to observe me with a solemn look.

Both Luna and her mother then looked at him.

"Dear?"

"Dad."

At the words of the mother and daughter, Luna's father cleared his throat.

"Ahem! My apologies! Please, take a seat."

“…Ah, okay."

I felt puzzled as I took my seat.

The meal was delightful.

The vegetables served were fresher than those at the academy, and the meat was to my taste.

Seeing Astina and Robert describe it as a home-cooked meal made me think it had a Western-style homemade touch.

After the meal, Luna provided each of us with a room.

We had an early dinner, and since it was summer, the sun had not set yet.

Despite this, I headed to my room.

Due to exams and then immediately coming to Railer's territory, I felt very tired.

Just as I was about to rest in my room,

"Rudy Astria."

A deep voice.

Luna's father called out to me.

"Did you call for me?"

I replied to Luna's father with a slightly awkward expression.

His quiet, solemn demeanor felt alright in group conversations, but it was somewhat uncomfortable when talking one-on-one.

Luna's father approached me, staring intently before speaking softly.

"Do you drink alcohol?"

CHAPTER 157
RAILER TERRITORY (6)

Railer family mansion, the Study.

"Hmm…"

Trickle—

"Thank you."

I received a glass of alcohol from Luna's father.

Though I was young, I had no problem drinking alcohol.

While drinking and smoking were prohibited within the academy, they were not legally prohibited in the Empire.

It was my first time drinking since I came to this world, and while I was worried about making a mistake, the anticipation of enjoying alcohol after a long time rose in me.

Luna's father extended his glass to me.

I took my glass with proper etiquette.

Even though my status might be higher, I showed respect to my friend's father.

Luna's father drank from his glass, and I followed suit.

"Ah… ssp."

The alcohol was strong.

A subtle fragrance lingered in my mouth, and when I swallowed, I felt a tingling sensation.

Also, a warm feeling spread through my insides.

I could definitely tell it was a high-quality drink.

“Let’s have another glass.”

Luna’s father refilled my glass, and I gladly accepted.

After pouring the drink, Luna’s father quietly spoke up.

“What do you think is more important, family or work?”

I lifted my head to look at him.

With no particular change in his expression, Luna’s father was simply looking at his glass as he spoke.

It was a somewhat abrupt question.

I thought we would talk about Luna, but this sudden change of topic made me curious.

“Both are important, aren’t they?”

“But still, one must come before the other.”

After pouring, Luna’s father looked at me.

I took a moment to ponder the question before responding.

“I think family comes first.”

“Why do you think that?”

"Just as running a family requires focusing on both the internal and external aspects, work can only be taken care of when the family is at peace, right?"

Upon hearing my answer, Luna’s father nodded.

His expression didn’t change, so I couldn’t tell exactly what he was thinking, but it

didn't look like I had given a completely wrong answer.

Without saying much else, Luna's father took another sip from his glass.

"I heard you are emerging as a prominent successor of the Astria family."

I swallowed hard at his words.

"Yes, I am working hard towards that."

"It is a challenging path."

"Still, I believe it's necessary to protect those around me."

The power of the Astria family.

Apart from space magic, it's a family with tremendous power, wealth, reputation, and strength, lacking nothing.

I believed that as long as I had the family's power, I could protect those around me.

"Don't you think challenging Ian Astria might endanger those around you?"

"It might, but the people around me aren't the type to be easily bullied. I trust them, and I will prevent such a situation from happening."

After I spoke, Luna's father smiled contentedly.

"Here."

Although I'd had quite a bit to drink, I was still in control, so I accepted.

"There's something I've been wanting to do."

Luna's father said this as he poured me a drink.

"What might that be?"

"We don't have any other men in our family, do we?"

"Yes…?"

"So, I've always thought it would be nice to have a son."

Luna's father said, slightly swirling his glass.

"To drink with my son, talk about the empire's situation, have honest conversations like this. I've always wanted to have that experience. So, I've always been envious of those with sons."

"…Oh, I see."

I felt a bit uneasy.

"But having a son-in-law doesn't seem too bad either. Hahaha. Having a drink and a chat like this with my son-in-law is quite fun."

"…Huh?"

My mind froze at his words.

Son-in-law?

Why am I suddenly a son-in-law?

"I was a bit upset at first about someone taking Luna away…"

"Uh… Sir?"

I knew it was impolite, but I interrupted him.

Luna's father laughed at my words.

"Ha-ha, just call me 'father'."

"Oh, no, it's not that…"

I cautiously opened my mouth.

"Why am I considered as a son-in-law…?"

"Hmm?"

Luna’s father looked at me, puzzled.

“…Wasn’t that the case?"

"Uh…”

"There was talk of marriage in the letter, wasn't there?"

"What?"

Right at that moment, the door to the room burst open, and Luna’s mother and Luna herself were there.

"Dad!!!!"

"L-Luna. H-Honey."

Her father stiffened at their appearance.

"H-How did you find your way here?"

The once dignified father of Luna had now gone pale.

"Oh dear, you!"

Luna’s mother strode towards us and hit her husband on the back.

"Ah, honey. I was just trying to have a brief chat!"

"I told you to stay put!"

"H-Honey!"

Her father cringed as he got smacked on the back by his wife.

Luna hurried over to me and asked urgently.

"He didn't say anything weird, did he? Didn’t ask you to do anything strange?"

She said this and then glanced at the glass in my hand.

"H-He made you drink?!"

"Uh… I did drink, but…"

"Dad!!!"

Luna turned and glared at her father.

"L-Luna. It's, it's not like that."

Her father stuttered, waving his hands.

I quickly said to Luna,

"Luna! I said I wanted to drink! Your father didn't really say anything strange, so it's okay!"

"Father?"

Luna looked surprised as I referred to him as 'father'.

In a hurry to speak, I used an odd form of address, but for now, it was more important to defuse the situation.

"I haven't been here for long! Nothing really happened, so……"

When I clarified the situation on behalf of her father, Luna's mother approached me with a smile.

"Rudy, I'm sorry. He's somewhat immature…… even when I tell him to stay quiet in front of others. Ha ha……"

"Oh, not at all……"

I responded with an awkward smile.

After nodding her head, the mother smiled at me.

“It’s getting late, you can go back to your room.”

“Yes…… I understand.”

After saying this, I looked at her father and walked out of the room.

Expressing his gratitude, he gave me a thumbs-up.

The next day.

I woke up early in the morning and stretched my body.

Having drunk alcohol, I had fallen asleep early and enjoyed a deep sleep.

So, despite having slept well, I woke up early in the morning.

I left my room and, while stretching, reminisced about the conversation from the previous day.

A letter, huh…

What on earth could this letter be about?

Thinking it through, the only answer seemed to be a letter from Luna.

After all, she is the only person related to me from the Railer family.

But then, what could possibly be in the letter that Luna sent, which made her father react that way?

Thinking about it, it was a bit strange.

Even when I met the butler in front of the Railer mansion, he reacted to my name, Rudy, rather than the name of the Astria family.

I thought it was no problem that people in the capital knew about me these days, but it was strange that he reacted to my name when I introduced myself.

“Hmm…”

It didn’t make sense that Luna would send a strange lie to the mansion.

That was not in her character.

“Rudy?”

When I turned my head, I saw Luna.

She was wearing a thin shawl over her shoulders and a simple white dress.

The dress, which looked like sleepwear yet was quite ordinary, suited Luna very well.

“You’re up early?”

Luna spoke to me with a gentle smile.

Seeing her like that made me smile as well.

“I went to bed early, so I woke up early.”

“Oh, did you fall asleep right after getting back yesterday? Well… I was tired too, so I went straight to sleep.”

Luna nodded understandingly as she said ‘Yes! Yes!’

“More than that, I’m sorry about what happened yesterday with my dad…”

“No, it’s fine. Nothing happened.”

As I shrugged my shoulders, Luna took a quick glance at me and opened her mouth to speak.

“That… Dad didn’t say anything strange, did he?”

I pondered upon hearing her question.

Should I tell her about this…?

It seemed like her father might have misunderstood something, so it might be good to let Luna know.

"He called me a son-in-law…"

"…What?"

Luna's eyes widened.

"My dad? Why would my dad suddenly…"

Luna spoke with a puzzled expression on her face.

"He mentioned something about a letter?"

"Le… letter?"

Luna furrowed her brow in confusion.

Seeing her reaction, as if she knew nothing about the letter, I tilted my head in confusion.

"You don't know about the letter?"

"Oh… that…"

Luna stammered before lowering her head and speaking.

"I… sometimes exchange letters with Mom… but I specifically told her not to show the contents to Dad… Did Dad talk about the letter?"

"He didn't exactly say it outright… When I asked why I'm the son-in-law…"

"My mom wouldn't say something like that…"

Luna muttered to herself, looking embarrassed.

I looked at Luna, who was in such a state, and smiled faintly.

"So, what did you write in that letter?"

“Uh, what?”

Luna, taken aback by my question, looked up.

I spoke in a playful tone.

"You didn't write something like a lie, did you?"

“No! Absolutely not!”

Luna shook her head vigorously.

I didn’t think she would lie, but I just wanted to tease Luna a bit.

“Then, what did you write that made your father misunderstand?”

As I continued to ask, Luna glared at me with her face turning red.

"Well, I wouldn't know what that is!"

"You don't know?"

As I continued to tease her, Luna frowned and opened her mouth.

"I wrote about how much I like Rudy."

"Huh?"

“How I came to like Rudy, what I like about him, and what I want to do together with him!”

It seemed that my continued teasing had upset her as she talked about the letter.

“I even talked with my mom about what it might be like if we got married later on! Why!”

Although Luna spoke boldly, her face turned red as if she was about to burst into tears.

Hearing such words from Luna right in front of me made my own face feel like it was

turning red.

I didn’t expect to hear such words right in front of me…

It felt like I had been the one played, even though I was the one trying to tease Luna.

I couldn’t look Luna in the eyes and slightly turned my head away.

“There… wasn’t a need to say all that…”

“You told me to say it!”

Luna, unable to meet my eyes either, turned her head to the opposite side.

For a while, we both just sat there, faces red, unable to look at each other.

CHAPTER 158
RAILER TERRITORY (7)

Blond-haired Rie stepped out of the carriage, her face etched with resentment.

"Ahahaha…"

"Didn't you say you'd go ahead? Why are you just arriving now?"

"Rie, you've worked hard…"

We all greeted Rie with a mix of reactions.

Her face clearly displayed the fatigue from her journey.

"Really… you all…"

She gritted her teeth, glaring at us.

"Come on, let's go inside and rest."

Alfredo, Luna's butler, gestured for Rie to follow him into the mansion.

"Ugh…"

Rie, though clearly having more to say, was too tired to speak and followed Alfredo inside.

"Let's rest up and meet later…"

With that, she bid us a temporary farewell and disappeared into the mansion.

"They all eventually arrived…"

Robert, observing from a distance, sighed and then approached us.

"It’s time to get to work."

"Work?"

Astina, confused, questioned Robert’s statement.

"We're here to investigate Levian’s spellbook."

Astina, not knowing the purpose of our visit, was understandably puzzled.

"Uh, what’s the plan?"

Hearing my question, Astina turned to Robert for answers.

"Now that you're here, Astina, I could use your help."

“…Are you planning to take advantage of us without offering any anything?"

"If you don’t want to help, feel free to leave."

Robert responded to Astina with indifference.

"Ha… Alright, I understand. I'll help. But…”

Astina then looked at me and Luna.

"What about them? What will they do?"

"Luna knows this area well. It would be efficient for her to investigate the surrounding territories, with Rudy assisting her."

Astina frowned, not entirely convinced by Robert's plan.

"Just do as you’re told."

“…Understood."

Astina agreed, though she clearly had reservations.

"Luna, focus on surveying the territories for any signs of old man Levian while you're

out there. I'll speak with your parents and search the mansion. Someone familiar with the mansion might overlook details because it's all too familiar to them."

"Yes! Got it."

Luna replied enthusiastically to Robert's instructions and quickly glanced at me.

It seemed like she was excited to have some time alone with me.

I felt tempted to tease her, to say, 'Did the professor send you to work or to have fun with me?' and give her a playful flick on the forehead.

But then a thought crossed my mind—had Robert arranged this on purpose?

I remembered his odd comments in the carriage about starting a harem.

No way…

He must've just assigned us to investigate.

Still…

"This is a place I used to play around a lot when I was a kid."

"Back in your mischievous days?"

"Ah, no! Well, yes, I was mischievous, but…"

Luna and I began our stroll, watching Robert and Astina head into the mansion.

Though our purpose was to explore, it felt more like we were leisurely hanging out, with Luna sharing stories of her childhood.

We roamed open fields to small hills, covering every inch of the territory.

Luna was excited to show me her childhood playgrounds.

I couldn't help but smile at her adorable demeanor.

"Wow, I can’t believe this is still here!"

"What is it?"

Luna exclaimed as she touched a large tree, bearing a prominent scar.

"When I was a kid, I was playing around, riding a cow, and it charged right into this tree!"

"Playing… riding a cow? And it ran into this tree?"

"Ah… cough, cough! Well, yes, but I was just a kid."

Examining the tree closely, I noticed the bark was slightly peeled, and there were two indentations that looked like they could have been made by a cow’s horns.

Judging from Luna’s story, it seemed like the cow’s horns had indeed hit the tree.

"There was a cow farm nearby, and I borrowed one…”

"You stole a cow?"

"It’s not stealing! I just borrowed it… and I returned it afterwards."

Luna’s voice trailed off as she realized what she had just admitted.

"Anyway, let’s check out some other places!"

“…Okay."

Just how mischievous was she as a child…

The more I heard about Luna’s childhood, the more unimaginable it became.

Leading the way, Luna looked back at me and said,

"Ru-Rudy… about the letter earlier, my dad misunderstood because he secretly read my mom's letter. So don’t worry about what he said! It was all a misunderstanding!"

"Oh."

Her words made me recall the earlier situation, causing my face to flush as I remembered her open confession of feelings for me.

"Th-That's good to know."

"Don't get me wrong… wait, no."

Luna paused, reflecting for a moment, then changed her expression and continued,

"It’s not a misunderstanding! If you become my husband, you will be my dad’s son-in-law!"

"What?"

Suddenly, Luna shifted her approach, coming closer to me.

"If you just become my son-in-law, it wouldn’t be a misunderstanding to my dad, but a fact!"

"But, I haven’t decided yet?"

At my response, Luna pouted.

"Do you want my dad to be mistaken? Are you saying it’s okay for him to misunderstand?"

Her tone was challenging, as if she was asking if I was ready to deal with her father's misconceptions.

"No, that’s not it. It really was a misunderstanding. Everything’s clear now."

"Uh…”

Luna turned her head away, looking frustrated.

“Then my dad will be disappointed!”

“…Huh?”

“He was so happy about the prospect of having a son-in-law… and now suddenly he

won't?"

Luna threw me a sly glance as she spoke.

"Rudy, you've done something wrong."

"…"

Is it really my fault?…

Though I felt wronged, I just nodded since Luna said so.

What exactly does she want, saying something like that?

She was definitely eager, almost picking a fight.

She seemed to have something she wanted to do by picking a fight.

"That's right. It's my fault."

Luna's demeanor brightened up as I accepted responsibility.

"So you admit you were wrong?"

"Yes, yes. I was wrong."

Suddenly, Luna reached out her hand to me.

"Then, you need to pay for your sins!"

"…Hmm?"

"Ho-hold my hand. Let's walk holding hands."

I looked at her outstretched hand, realizing her playful and challenging demeanor was just a way to get me to hold her hand.

"Alright. I'll hold your hand."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Really?”

Holding hands didn't seem like such a big deal to me.

Perhaps I’ve become more open to the idea after that incident with Rie.

Regardless, I was willing to hold Luna’s hand.

Without saying anything more, I took her hand in mine.

“Eh…”

“Hmm…”

Her hand was soft and warm.

“Wait, my hand is sweaty…”

“If you let go, then it's over.”

“Eek…!”

Luna, on the verge of releasing my hand, suddenly gripped it tighter.

“So if we keep holding hands, we’ll be together forever, right?”

“Try and see.”

And so, Luna started walking beside me, holding my hand.

I initially thought holding hands was trivial and agreed to it without much thought, but it turned out to be quite special.

The warmth from her hand transmitted to mine.

It felt like we were a couple, and my heart was racing.

I wasn’t sure how much strength to use or where to look.

It seemed I wasn’t the only one feeling this way.

“Uh… ah…”

Luna's eyes were twirling around while holding my hand.

She was leading the way, but I wondered if she actually knew where she was going.

“Miss Luna?”

In this dizzying situation, someone spoke to us.

It was a middle-aged man who looked like a normal farmer.

“Oh… um, hello sir. It’s been a while!”

Luna seemed to know the man and greeted him.

“When did you get back? The lord has been talking about you every day, saying how much he misses you, Miss Luna.”

The farmer spoke with a bright face.

Seeing him talk so lightly about the lord, I could feel how close Luna’s father was with his subjects.

"But still……”

The farmer shifted his gaze towards me, glancing at our interlocked hands.

"Ha, even if you've returned, the young master must be feeling bitter! Bringing back such a handsome boyfriend like this!"

"Ah……”

Luna, with eyes wide in surprise, followed his gaze to our entwined hands.

She hesitated for a moment as if she was about to let go, but then she stopped.

She lifted her head and stared straight at me.

"If I let go……”

It seemed like she remembered my words about it being over if she let go, and she gripped my hand even tighter.

"Wow… It feels like just yesterday Miss Luna was playing and riding the cows at our house, and now she's brought back a boyfriend… It's quite a nostalgic feeling."

"Oh, Mister!"

Ah……

So what he said before was true.

"The marks are still on that tree, aren't they? That mischievous Miss Luna, really… Phew! But it's a relief to see she's grown up so well and beautifully.

Oh, and not just that…"

"Uwaa! Mister!!"

I thought some exaggeration was mixed in, but it looks like it was all true.

I wonder what kind of childhood she had…

Watching the farmer shiver as he recounted Luna's childhood made it seem like it was indeed an extraordinary one.

When he tried to continue with another story from her childhood, Luna frantically waved her hands to stop him, not forgetting to hold onto mine while doing so.

Seeing this, the farmer grinned contentedly.

"Hehe, it's good to see. Oh my! Come to think of it, I believe I've interrupted you two! I should be going now. Ha ha ha."

"Goodbye, take care!"

Despite the farmer being a commoner, Luna responded to him with polite language.

After bidding him farewell, she pressed her lips together tightly and looked at me.

"Uh…… Now I can’t marry anyone else…”

"No, no. If we hadn’t held hands, this wouldn’t have…”

"I don’t care! Uh……”

Blushing, Luna covered her face with both hands, all the while still tightly gripping mine.

"Is this about Levian?"

Luna's father had a significantly surprised expression upon hearing Robert's words.

Clearly, he was aware of who Levian was.

It was Luna's father who had passed the magic book to Luna.

Moreover, he had also allowed Levian to stay in their territory.

However, the strangest part was that he had not reported this fact to the empire.

"You are aware that this person was a great wizard, right?"

Levian was not just any wizard known to a select few.

Any noble would be expected to recognize his name, such a prominent figure he was, having left behind numerous accomplishments.

“…I am aware."

Luna’s father replied, meeting Robert’s gaze squarely.

"There is no need for caution. We are here to help."

"To help?"

"The magic book that Luna possesses. It is undoubtedly a magical tool of tremendous power, and its existence has become known to the world."

The fact that Luna held such a magic book had become known to a select few.

However, since Luna was at the academy, and there were always people to protect her when she went out, no one had dared to touch her.

“…Indeed, there was an incident recently where someone from the capital came to visit our territory."

"We are here to protect Luna from them."

Robert spoke with a serious expression.

"Is protecting Luna all you are here for?"

“…Of course not."

"Then why are you seeking out traces of Levian?"

Taking a moment, Robert opened his mouth to speak.

"I was a disciple of Levian."

"A disciple?"

"It’s a bit of two things; seeking revenge, and fulfilling my duty as his disciple."

Robert spoke calmly, but his hands were tightly clenched into fists.

CHAPTER 159
RAILER TERRITORY (8)

Deep in the forest.

"Where are we…”

Without complaint, I followed the path into the forest.

I didn't have a specific destination in mind, nor was I familiar with the surroundings.

So, I let the journey unfold as it would.

"Hmm… Wasn't it here? It should be, right? Did Dad clear it out?"

Luna was searching through the bushes, mumbling to herself.

"Ah, right! Here it is!"

Her face lit up as she found what she was looking for, then she turned to me with a bright smile.

"What is this place?"

"Do you remember? Professor Robert was looking into something about Grandfather Levian."

Luna reminded me as she parted the bushes to show me.

"This is where Grandfather Levian used to stay!"

A small, fragile-looking hut stood before us, as if a gentle push could topple it over.

It was made of worn fabric and wood, and cobwebs adorned its corners, signifying long neglect.

"But why is this still here?"

Levian had died when Luna was about 9 or 10, which meant this hut had stood here for around a decade.

"There wasn't a reason to tear it down… Plus, Grandfather's things are here!"

Luna said with a cheerful tone, beckoning me through the underbrush.

She tugged at my hand, urging me to follow her inside.

"Cough, cough! Ugh… So dusty!"

As Luna lifted the tent fabric, a cloud of dust billowed out.

She flapped her hands, trying to clear the air.

"Soft Wind."

I cast a spell to sweep the dust away from us.

"Ooh… Hehe, thank you."

Luna said with a grin, then pulled back the tent cover completely.

"Wow."

The hut was barely large enough for one or two people.

Inside, various items were neatly arranged: a few books, various items, and a thin cloth on the floor, making the space livable for one person.

Luna stepped inside, and I followed, peeking over her shoulder.

"Nothing has changed."

She said, her smile tinged with nostalgia.

"But why are these things still here?"

"Hm? Oh, I just never thought about cleaning it up…”

Luna replied, shrugging.

I was puzzled.

Usually, a deceased person's belongings are stored or rehomed, but everything here remained untouched, as if deliberately preserved.

I picked up one of the books, curious.

"…”

As I opened it, Luna's hand stopped me, her grip firm.

"Luna, could you let go…?"

I asked, trying to be gentle.

She looked at me, her eyes sharp.

“I haven’t let it go yet!”

“Understood. I’ll just look through this quickly and then give it back.”

“Hmm! Fine! I’ll let go then!”

Satisfied, Luna loosened her hold.

I gave her a small smile before focusing on the book again.

This book, left here and forgotten, was intriguing.

Any item that once belonged to Levian was valuable, no matter how trivial, because people cherish items once owned by noteworthy individuals.

"Let's see…”

I carefully dusted off the cover and turned the page.

“…What’s this?"

I was expecting something profound, but to my surprise, the book contained very basic magical spells.

The book wasn’t penned by Levian; it was just a well-printed volume.

Something felt off, so I kept turning the pages.

"Fireball, Wind Cutter, Water Ball, Wind Blaster."

It was a basic textbook, the kind used when one first learns magic.

By now, the spells were so elementary to me that I can use them without referencing the book.

Looking for something unique, I scrutinized the pages but found only simple content.

The book was old and lacked several parts compared to the material I had studied.

"Why would Levian have this book here?"

I was genuinely perplexed.

“Oh, that book. I remember seeing it a long time ago.”

“So you haven’t been here since you were a kid?”

“Yeah! Didn't I tell you? There was a magical beast encounter near here, and it was dangerous. Dad said I should stay away.”

Her explanation made sense, but then it struck me – shouldn't this hut be moved?

If magical beasts were around, wouldn’t they damage these relics?

On our way here, it seemed unlikely for such creatures to get close unnoticed.

There were soldiers patrolling, and the flat terrain outside the forest provided clear visibility.

The more I thought about it, the more questions popped up.

The soldiers seemed to be protecting the forest, and they deliberately did not touch the books.

But why?

This basic spellbook could simply be stored at the Railer Mansion, right?

And why would a wizard of Levian's stature keep such a simple book with him?

My suspicion was slowly turning into certainty.

"Luna, can you do me a favor?"

"Hmm?"

She looked at me, head cocked.

"Can you check if there's any magic or mechanisms in this spellbook?"

"Well…"

Luna had more expertise with magical items than I did, so she was the right person to ask.

She flipped through the book, checking it over.

"It doesn't seem to have any mechanisms…"

Luna then pulled a book from her bag and opened it to a page on analysis magic.

The book didn't look like a magical tool, but appearances can be misleading, so she decided to test it.

"Activate."

A bright light shone from her book, and the spellbook absorbed it.

A magic circle then burst forth and expanded around the book.

“…Huh?”

Luna’s brow furrowed.

“This is… a magical tool, isn’t it?”

Her comment made me smile.

“What kind of magic is it?”

“It looks like it might be illusion magic.”

She examined the magic circle with focus.

“Can you undo it?”

“It looks like I might be able to.”

She scrutinized the magic circle and picked up the spellbook.

Then, quite unexpectedly, she dropped it onto the ground.

Thud—

“Huh?”

“Did it work?”

Luna opened the book once more.

“Hmm… No, that didn’t do it.”

She tapped the book thoughtfully and looked at me.

“Rudy, could you hit this book hard for me?”

“Strike the book?”

“It seems there's a specific way to solve this… but it might take time to figure out.”

“And until then?”

“This book is tied to illusion magic. Illusion magic typically breaks when the caster or the object is directly affected.”

“…Ah.”

Luna meant that rather than analyzing the illusion, we should physically disrupt the magical tool to break the spell.

Rather than meticulously unraveling each knot, it's easier to just cut them all at once.

“Sounds like a plan.”

I grinned, took the book, and stepped out of the hut.

“Luna, step back a bit, will you?”

“Okay!”

Luna's attempt hadn't dispelled the magic—obviously, a stronger impact was necessary.

Yet, I couldn't risk damaging the book.

So, I collected just enough mana in my hand, neither too little nor too excessive.

I tossed the book to the ground and, with a precise motion, punched down towards it.

“Hup!”

Thud—

My fist made contact with the book.

The force was moderate, aimed to shock but not destroy.

“Wow.”

The book's exterior began to quiver, the surface transforming before my eyes.

“The magic’s been broken.”

Luna scampered over to me.

I lifted the book, now altered, and read the new title etched on its surface.

“…Necronomicon, production diary?”

I raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Back at the Railer mansion,

"Levian sought asylum in the empire…”

"I don’t know every detail. I was only following Levian’s last wishes. He claimed it was the only way to keep Luna safe, so I obeyed."

Luna’s father’s words caused Robert to frown.

"To protect Luna?"

"The empire believes Levian fled here."

"Hm?"

Robert was visibly skeptical at this abrupt change of topic.

Luna’s father clarified,

"Levian didn’t come here on the run."

These words made Robert’s expression stern.

The prevailing belief was that Levian had run away with the magic book.

Confusion swirled in Robert’s mind.

Luna’s father shook his head, watching Robert's reaction.

"That's not the story Levian shared with me. Upon his arrival, he immediately sought me out. He needed a place out of sight, away from prying eyes. Then…”

He paused, seeming hesitant to continue,

"He instructed me to give this book to Luna after his experiment was done."

"An experiment?"

Robert was puzzled about this so-called experiment.

And then it clicked—if the book before him was the same…

"Is that what Luna has?"

"Yes. He said that he would be dead by the time the experiment was finished, so he asked me to pass it on to her."

"Ah."

Levian hadn’t eloped with the magic book after all.

Nor was the book a product of some secretive lab.

This revelation struck Robert forcefully.

He had assumed the magic book had been created and then stolen, but the truth was different.

The magic book wasn’t created beforehand, and Levian hadn’t run away—he had come to this land of his own accord.

With Levian gone before concluding his experiment, those left behind couldn’t complete the magic book.

The experiment’s head had vanished.

'Dead by the time the experiment was finished…?'

Complex thoughts flooded Robert’s mind.

Amid his contemplation, Astina, who stood beside him, interjected.

"But what does it mean to keep Luna safe?"

"Didn’t Levian mention he had a purpose for coming here?"

Luna’s father’s statement made Astina nod.

"The Saint… no, the former Saint Beatrice. Levian said he sought this place out after speaking to her."

“…Beatrice?"

At the mention of that name, Astina's eyes grew wide, laced with astonishment.

CHAPTER 160
RAILER TERRITORY (9)

[Throughout my career, I've earned esteemed titles like Archmage and Sage, amassed a wealth of knowledge, and even contributed new insights to the realm of magic. Yet, I haven't grasped all the knowledge in the world.]

[One question has always haunted me: Is death truly inescapable for us? Does a person's story simply end with death? I reckon every wizard must grapple with this notion at least once.]

[A wizard is someone who turns the inconceivable into reality. Driven by this conviction, I embarked on my research.]

"Hmm…"

Luna and I were deeply engrossed in Levian's research journal, captivated by its contents.

The journal delved into the pursuit of human immortality and resurrection, subjects closely tied to the taboo of necromancy, a magic outlawed within the empire.

It raised the question: Had Levian, a Royal Wizard, truly ventured into this forbidden territory?

I read on.

[The Fred and Astria families have lent their support to my research. The Freds, with their prowess in magical innovation, and the influential Astrias provide all that we need.]

[However, we have decided to proceed with our research in a direction different from necromancy. Necromancy requires death to give life, which is not what I desire.]

"A research path diverging from necromancy?"

This was a puzzling revelation.

As documented, necromancy was frequently explored in the context of immortality and resurrection, but such explorations had always been met with failure.

Resurrection spells yielded only a semblance of life, not a true revival.

A reanimated shell is a far cry from a living being.

As for immortality, one could only extend their life by taking it from others, which differed from the true meaning of immortality.

Necromancy was widely perceived as the pinnacle of such studies.

However, Levian chose to discard this approach, convinced that the true life and rebirth could not stem from necromancy.

Life borne from the end of another was a mere continuation of the cycle he sought to break.

That was Levian's conviction.

We continued to sift through the journal.

It was devoid of personal details, concentrating on research milestones and discoveries.

Levian's research primarily centered around magical tools.

Magic operates on the principle of equivalent exchange: expending mana to weave spells.

Crafting magical tools inevitably requires mana stones.

With mana stones at hand, one can create magical tools.

Levian's thesis proposed that life could be sustained with mana stones.

This resonated with me.

Imagine the marvel if life could be secured through mana alone.

The mana stones in this world are being produced in such abundance that they are almost inexhaustible.

They line the depths of mines in great clusters, and that's just one source – slaying magical beasts yields mana stones formed within their bodies, akin to gallstones.

In essence, mana stones are an almost limitless resource here.

With a steady influx of mana stones, Levian's research advanced quickly.

The Fred family provided the necessary stones, and in exchange, Levian devoted himself to the study of magical tools and the essence of life.

The Astrias funded these expenses.

Although unusual for a Royal Wizard to align with noble houses like the Astrias and Freds, Levian had never shown any political motives.

However, something was strange.

No matter how much I read through the journal, the research wasn’t progressing.

Despite the high-quality mana stones supplied by the Fred family, none were strong enough for Levian’s magic circle, designed for the intricate task of resurrection.

Not once had it been successfully activated, even in preliminary tests.

Nevertheless, Levian was relentless, tirelessly refining the magic circles for the magical tools and delving into the art of mana stone processing — a field he was less familiar with, yet approached with unwavering dedication.

[One day, the Fred family delivered a peculiar mana stone unearthed from a northern mine. It was unlike any I'd seen before.]

[The stone's capacity for mana was remarkable, as was its ability to draw in mana from its surroundings.]

[Utilizing this stone, I crafted a magical tool. To my astonishment, it functioned; the

magic circle ignited with life. After a year of relentless effort, I had finally made a breakthrough.]

"Does this mean… it worked?"

Luna's eyes widened with the realization.

Progress in research is typically incremental.

Even if initial attempts falter, one expects gradual improvements.

The magic circle's mana demands and the stone's mana output should be carefully balanced to optimize performance and efficiency.

Yet here we had an anomaly: a magic circle that, despite its initial demand for a significant mana input and failure to work all this time, had suddenly sprang to life, working perfectly.

"Doesn't this look strange no matter how you look at it?"

"Uh… I've never seen research like this before…"

Luna, seasoned in magical tool research, voiced her skepticism.

Given her level of involvement in research, she must have certainly read hundreds of research journals by now.

"This could be deemed… a miracle."

"A miracle, indeed…"

A sudden miracle.

It's suspicious.

We were not the only ones who felt this way.

[It was strange. The magic circle, once resistant to our efforts, now responded perfectly with each attempt. I have never heard of such a mana stone.]

[The Fred family assured us it was a yet-to-be-commercialized find. Perhaps I'm just too old to accept new changes?]

[For now, I decided to positively accept this development and press forward with my research.]

The research took strides once the Fred family supplied the unique mana stone.

[Resurrection magic's cornerstone lay in the principles of healing magic. We hypothesized that maximizing healing magic could be the key to reclaiming life.]

[After two and a half years, our efforts were close to fruition. We had achieved the revival of deceased animals.]

[Of course, we did not consider using this on humans.]

[We couldn’t predict the potential consequences or the condition in which a person might be restored, so we proceeded with caution.]

Then, tragedy struck close to Levian.

[Robert’s grief led to disaster. He tried to use necromancy to save his wife but ended up losing his son. He couldn’t resurrect his wife and lost his nearby son as well.]

[We just needed a bit more time. If he had waited until this magic tool was completed.]

Robert's accident.

[I was aware that he was experimenting with necromancy, but I never imagined he would act so recklessly. He learned much from me and pursued further studies independently.]

[How could he not see that necromancy is a path that only begets more death? I feel more disappointed than sorry for him.]

"This means…”

"Professor Robert lost his son in an attempt to resurrect his wife…”

I didn't know much about Robert's past.

Nor was I aware that his wife had died so young.

The reason Robert turned to necromancy was to bring back his wife.

However, the resurrection through necromancy was incomplete, and it seemed he lost his son as a result.

As I read on, confusion settled in.

Why would this account be in the research journal for the Necronomicon?

What does this have to do with the magical tool Levian is developing?

I had my doubts.

[For a royal wizard like Robert, even execution wouldn't be unimaginable.]

[I confronted him first. After that, I began to trace the origins of his necromantic knowledge. He must have acquired it somewhere. My investigation revealed that he learned it in Ephomos, the underground city of the impoverished.]

[Knowing this, I approached the Emperor with a proposition. We would seize all of Robert’s possessions but won't punish him further. Instead, I proposed to discreetly deal with the situation by purging Ephomos.]

[As I was preparing to clean up Ephomos, Perrian Astria came to me. He opposed the purging of Ephomos.]

Perrian Astria must be my father.

Although, I've never seen his face.

I tilted my head in confusion.

The Astria family is against the cleanup of the slums?

In my mind, the Astria lineage was corrupt and degenerate.

A family fixated on dominating the empire.

Yet now, they were defending the slums?

This defied my understanding.

[Despite the risks, I decided to proceed. Perrian was oblivious to the agreement between the emperor and me. I must act before he finds out.]

[I began the purging of Ephomos. I detained the necromancers and drove out the inhabitants of the slums, trying to minimize casualties. Force was reserved only for those who resisted.]

[In the final stages of the Ephomos operation, I noticed something strange. A mana stone discovered within the necromancers' laboratory. It was imbued with an astonishing concentration of mana.]

[It bore an uncanny resemblance to the mana stone supplied by the Fred family. Unless my senses or my own mana deceived me, this mana stone was undoubtedly identical to that provided by the Freds.]

[A thorough search of the lab unearthed a staggering number of corpses. Too numerous to count. Recalling the mana stone, I meticulously reviewed all the research documents in the lab related to that stone.]

[This mana stone was derived from the amassed bodies within the lab. Specifically, from people who were still alive. It was a man-made mana stone. Each mana stone contained hundreds of lives. The enormous amount of mana it harbored now made sense.]

"A mana stone… crafted from living people…?"

"…We should keep reading for now."

I tried to calm Luna down as I spoke.

[I confronted the Fred family with the mana stone. They confessed without hesitation. It was indeed their doing. The empire's lack of oversight over the underground city allowed for countless unnoticed deaths, which the Freds exploited.]

[They orchestrated the mass production of mana stones through the necromancers. Was this why Perrian Astria tried to stop me?]

[I fell into self-loathing. My research, which was on the verge of transcending the boundaries of necromantic resurrection magic, had succeeded by employing necromancy itself. While I admonished Robert, I was unwittingly wielding the same dark power.]

[No. I am worse than Robert. I accused him of being led astray by his curiosity, which cost his son his life. But at least Robert's intent was pure—he wanted to save his wife. My own pursuits lacked such nobility. The adage 'curiosity killed the cat' was truly meant for me.]

[The magical tool is nearing completion. In a year or two, it could be presented to the world. But should I continue this research? This research…]

The journal entries that followed degenerated into indecipherable scribbles.

The journal's last entries appeared to mirror his unraveling mind.

Words scrawled with shaky, haphazard strokes.

"…Is this where it ends?"

If Levian is in such a state, the research couldn't continue.

With Levian at the helm of the magic circle's development—the crux of the project—any further progress was unlikely.

I turned a few more pages, my frown deepening with concern.

Suddenly, I stumbled upon a page where the handwriting was clear and deliberate.

[I met Beatrice.]

[I have made my decision.]

[Such tragedies must never happen again. I must put an end to all this research. So, I decided to listen to Beatrice. I will embark on a new line of research, drawing upon the necromantic practices I've studied and those employed by the Fred family. This

diary is the reason why I decided to create this magical tool—The Necronomicon. A magical tool that can even harness the powers of gods.]

[The basis of magic is equivalent exchange. I will put my life on the line for this magical tool.]

A great wizard's life in exchange for a magical tool that can wield the powers of gods.

Levian decided to make this exchange.

CHAPTER 161
RAILER TERRITORY (10)

[A spellbook that enables the use of all magic. I will henceforth refer to it as the Necronomicon.]

We have read the entire journal.

Yet, not all our questions have been answered.

There was mention of Beatrice, but details were little.

It simply stated that following Beatrice's words, the journey led to the Railer territory.

There, upon arrival at the Railer domain, research began in a humble hut.

To be precise, it was about manifesting the results of completed research.

Levian created the spellbook with his life, much like how the Fred family had crafted mana stones from people.

The culmination of his work was the magic tome that Luna now possessed.

A tome inscribed with the magics he'd dedicated his life to studying, enabling the wielding of all spells, and also an object imbued with the life of a great wizard.

"Both are back, I see."

Upon our return to the Railer Estate, Robert greeted us.

Both Robert and Astina wore grave expressions.

"Have you managed to learn anything important?"

"I'm not sure if it's good news, but yes, we have."

We began to inform them about Levian's actions, explaining why he created the magic tome that Luna held, and how he managed to do it, in great detail.

As he listened to our story, Robert clenched his fist so tightly that his fingernails seemed to dig into his skin, threatening to draw blood.

I couldn't tell if his emotion was sorrow or anger; it seemed a tangled mix of both.

We finished our part and looked at Robert, who, lost in thought, didn't immediately respond.

After a moment, he lifted his head.

"I apologize for the trouble."

"It's fine."

We assured him with a smile.

"But what did you hear from the Railer mansion?"

At my question, Astina spoke up.

"We've heard about why Levian came here and what happened afterward. It appears to align with your story."

"What happened afterward?"

Astina nodded at my question and continued.

"Just as you said, Levian died after creating the magic tome here. But, as you're also aware, the reason he left that tome to Luna is a mystery."

Astina pulled a letter from within her robes.

"This is a letter Levian left for Luna's father."

I took the letter that Astina handed to me and unfolded it.

[Upon my death, give the magic tome in front of you to Luna. That book will save not only Luna but also others. I entrust this to you.]

The letter was brief.

The handwriting was much more degraded than what we had seen before.

The letters were pressed down as if with great effort, yet they sprawled erratically, suggesting a lack of control in the hand that wrote them.

"Baron Railer said that Levian mentioned Luna right from the start of his visit, claiming it was at the request of the former saint, Beatrice…"

Beatrice…

Her name was connected to my presence here and now Luna's situation.

"Luna's father, to conceal Levian's visit, left his belongings in a hut and erased his traces. It seems wiser to leave them undisturbed since the testimonies of the locals who claimed to have seen Levian aren't concrete evidence."

"That was a wise decision. Trying to hide it outright could have raised more suspicion."

"Exactly. Getting rid of everything completely would have increased the chances of discovery."

Even the powerful Astria ducal house couldn't just scour a provincial domain like this for Levian…

However, if there had been signs of someone trying to erase their tracks or hiding something, it would have raised suspicion.

But if there is obvious evidence, it could actually lessen any doubts.

Especially if that evidence was nothing more than rumors among the local populace.

It seemed Luna's father was also worried, as he had soldiers stationed nearby.

They were tasked with preventing people from entering the forest where Levian's

belongings were found.

Officially, they were there because of a recent incident where Luna had been in danger, though it seems they hadn't aroused any suspicion with their presence.

"By the way, have you heard anything about what Beatrice said?"

"Luna's father seemed unaware as well. I'll have to look elsewhere for information on that."

"Hmm…"

After all, there were already plans to investigate Beatrice, so not knowing at this moment didn't seem to be a problem.

It's always better to act sooner rather than later, but rushing could lead to mistakes.

I thought it was necessary to allow for some leeway.

Once the situation seemed to be under control, Astina turned to look at Luna and me.

Then, with her arms crossed and a frown that said she was displeased, she asked,

"Given the circumstances, I've been holding off asking, but how long do you plan on holding that hand?"

"Ah…"

Caught up in serious conversation, I had forgotten all about it.

I looked at Luna with an awkward expression.

Luna, with a satisfied smile, said,

"Rudy promised he would keep holding on."

"Rudy did?"

Astina turned her gaze to me, questioning.

"It might sound strange, but…”

"Does it?"

Astina's gaze was icy as she looked back at me.

"No, it's just that… there's a reason. I said I would hold on until Luna lets go…”

"What?"

An intensity I had never seen before in Astina’s eyes was directed at me.

It wasn’t magic, but my face tingled as if scorched by a spell.

"Yes, that's what was said."

Astina's attention returned to Luna.

"Luna, could you come with me for a chat?"

“…Me?"

Luna tensed up at the request.

"Let's go talk after you 'let go' of the hand."

Let go.

It seemed Astina’s words were a response to the previous mention of holding hands until Luna decided to let go.

"I don't want to! Absolutely not!"

Luna reacted vehemently to such a suggestion.

Astina’s eyes twinkled even more at Luna's response.

"Luna?"

The smile that crept on her face, with veins popping on her forehead, was more menacing than anything.

Luna was visibly frightened, frozen like a rabbit in front of a predator.

Yet, Luna didn't let go of the hand.

Seeing Luna refuse to comply, Astina, unable to maintain her composure any longer, raised her voice.

"Let it go."

"No, I don’t want to!"

Luna declared resolutely.

It seemed like a childish squabble, but the two were dead serious.

Astina took a step forward, glaring at Luna.

"Let go."

As Astina approached, Luna clung to my shoulder in fear.

"Ru-Rudy! Help!"

"Oh?"

Astina uttered an exclamation as if amused, but her expression was far from interested.

"Rudy, are you going to stop me?"

"No, it's not that…”

Astina's menacing tone made me break out in a cold sweat.

What should I do in a situation like this?

Panicking, I took a step back, while Astina closed in on me.

Clunk—

Suddenly, the door of the room we were in burst open.

A woman with golden hair came rushing in.

"Gasp!"

With a sharp breath, she hurled herself towards Luna.

"Eh?"

"Hmm?"

Caught off guard, Luna's grip loosened, and she stumbled backward, releasing my hand.

"Luna, I've missed you so much~."

The woman said smugly.

"Huh? Wha?"

Luna looked baffled, alternating her gaze between the woman embracing her and her own hand that was just freed.

The released hand and…

"Rie?"

The woman holding her was Rie.

Rie looked at Luna with a smile as if oblivious to everything.

"What's wrong? Something happened?"

Rie asked, her smile innocent, but her face was full of slyness.

It was clear she had intended to separate me and Luna.

"Rie, Rie!!"

Luna exclaimed as if she was wronged.

"Hmm? What's the matter? Sorry~ I was just so happy to see you!"

Rie spoke with an exaggerated smile.

Luna stamped her feet in frustration, an expression of utter injustice on her face.

"This… this is invalid!"

"Invalid? What is?"

But it's not like one could reason with someone pretending to be ignorant.

Especially not someone with Luna's temperament.

"Ugh…"

Luna could only pout, unable to retort to Rie.

"Rie."

At that moment, Astina, who had been watching, spoke up.

"Well done."

Astina said, giving a thumbs-up with a hint of admiration.

That night.

After dinner, I stepped out into the mansion's front garden with Rie.

Since Rie had come aboard the same ship as us, it was necessary for her to hear the information we had uncovered.

Although we received sharp looks from Astina and Luna when we excused ourselves,

they let us go without a word when we mentioned it was about business.

"Ah, I've already heard all about it."

“…What?"

"How do you think I suddenly appeared? I timed it just right."

Confused by Rie's comment, I gave her a puzzled look.

"I've been listening almost from the beginning, but the mood seemed off, so I stayed outside. It would have been strange to just barge in at that moment."

…

Considering she had caused Luna to release my hand upon entering, I wonder if she might have been eavesdropping…

"Then you could've just said you overheard us."

The reason Astina and Luna let us go so easily must have been because they knew Rie needed to hear this story, but wasn't this situation somewhat odd?

Rie then smiled and spoke.

"Hehe, why would I?"

Clinging to me suddenly, she grabbed my arm.

"Missing out on a perfect opportunity to be alone together? I'm no fool."

Her forwardness caught me off guard, and my eyes widened.

"Hey, hey, someone might see us…”

"Oh! So it's okay if we're somewhere no one can see us?"

"Don't twist my words."

Rie stepped back slightly, then with a charming smile, looked around us.

"Shall we go somewhere out of sight? If we go to such a place…”

As she scanned the surroundings, our eyes met.

She was a short distance away, but still in front of me.

Close, but not too close.

Our eyes locked, and I couldn't help but recall our last encounter.

The memory of our previous kiss flushed my cheeks.

I wasn't the only one affected.

Rie, seemingly reminded of the same moment, was startled as our eyes met and she stopped her speech.

The seductress from moments ago was nowhere to be found; instead, a blushing, shy girl stood before me.

Rie quietly came to my side and suggested,

“…Shall we, maybe, just take a walk before going in?"

“…Let's do that."

She obediently turned to walk beside me through the garden.

"Uh…”

A few minutes passed in an awkward silence before Rie, her embarrassment seemingly subsided, finally spoke up.

"So, what do we do now?"

"Do what?"

I was taken aback by her question.

Even now, thinking about marriage—

"Where are we going now? Are we returning to the Academy?"

Ah.

Realization hit me, and I clamped my mouth shut.

She was asking about our next steps.

I felt a bit embarrassed, but I managed my expression and began to speak.

"Professor Robert asked someone he knows for a favor, so I think we might stop by there on our way."

"Hmm…"

Rie nodded as if she understood.

Then, as we started walking again,

Suddenly, I felt warmth at my side.

"…What's this?"

Looking down, I saw Rie's hand burrowing into my side.

"…What!"

When I made a strange face, Rie, on the contrary, let out a loud exclamation.

And then her hand wrapped around my arm, locking arms with me.

"…Hey, we're far enough away that no one will come by here."

Rie blushed, but spoke as if it was nothing.

"If you can hold hands with Luna, then arm-in-arm should be okay!"

"…That was different."

"I, I'll let you walk like this with me just for a bit! Then I'll forgive you!"

“…Okay."

"Hmm!"

Rie smiled contentedly and clung to my arm.

Is this really okay…?

Feeling both pleased and confused, I sighed.

CHAPTER 162
RESCUE OPERATION (1)

In the quiet and dark room, the sound of ice clinking against a glass could be heard.

Within it was strong whiskey, and Robert stared intently at the glass.

"What on earth were you trying to do, Levian?"

Robert swirled the glass with alcohol in hand, pondering deeply.

The stories he had heard upon his arrival at the Railer territory.

What had Levian heard from Beatrice to make such a choice?

Was it because of the sacrifices at Ephomos?

Or because he was involved in necromancy?

Could it have been atonement for such matters?

If it were atonement, there were plenty of other choices.

He could have offered support to those who were banished from Ephomos or use the name of a great wizard to overthrow families like the Astria or the Fred.

But Levian had not done so.

What was his intention in creating such a spellbook?

There were other questions too.

'Heh, you might just be the most exceptional of my disciples. I have high expectations for you.'

Levian often said this out of habit.

'A disciple is like a child to their teacher, even more so for an old man like myself.'

The same Levian had exiled him from the empire.

When he had lost his son, Levian had seemed like an enemy.

But upon reflection, there seemed to be no reason for that.

Robert just needed someone to blame.

The thought that it was all his own fault was unbearable.

But knowing the truth brought a sense of self-loathing.

Levian had exiled Robert to save him, even going as far as doing things he would not normally do.

"What am I, of all people, to say."

Bringing the glass to his lips, Robert let out a sigh.

The next morning, we packed our belongings and prepared to leave the estate.

Having gathered the necessary information from the Railer territory, there was no reason to stay.

Luna's parents came out to the mansion's front to see us off.

"Dad, Mom. I'll be going now!"

"Take care, Luna. Write to us often."

"We'll be on our way."

"May your paths be filled with light."

Luna's mother said with a smile, bidding us farewell.

As we all began to board the carriage, an interruption came.

"Hem hem… Rudy Astria?"

Luna's father cleared his throat, approaching me.

"I apologize for the misunderstanding the other day."

"No, it's fine,"

I said with an awkward laugh.

"Still, I've taken a liking to you."

"I also…"

"I'd like to meet you next time as a prospective son-in-law!"

"…What?"

Luna's father stood there, stern-faced, giving a thumbs-up.

"Oh, no."

"Rudy Astria, get in the carriage."

Robert called to me from behind.

"Right, we'll meet again soon, prospective son-in-law."

"Rudy Astria."

"Ah… no."

Unable to say anything else to Luna's father due to Robert's summons, I returned to the carriage.

Inside, it was just Luna and Robert, as it had been when I first arrived.

Luna cocked her head in curiosity as I entered the carriage.

"What did Dad say?"

“…Nothing. It wasn't important."

As I tried to brush it off, Luna squinted her eyes at me.

"Hmm…”

"It really was nothing…”

Seeing that I insisted, Luna broke into a smile and spoke.

"Okay! I'll trust you!"

While it wasn't something I couldn't talk about, I suspected bringing it up would lead to comments like 'Even my parents approve!' and the like.

Better to leave it unsaid.

Looking to change the subject, I turned to Robert.

"Professor, where are you planning to go now?"

We were supposed to be returning to the Gotram territory, where the Mercenary Guild and Jack were.

However, I had told Jack I would return in about five days, and it hadn't been that long yet.

"We'll just go to Gotram territory. There's nothing else to do, is there?"

"I suppose not."

"Once there, we can live it up on that fellow's money. After all, it's practically money I made."

"Ahaha…”

And so, we set off for Gotram territory.

"Hmm…”

"Is this the place?"

Rie frowned as she looked at the building.

The mercenary guild, which had also been used as a pub, had its doors firmly closed.

Luna tilted her head and spoke up, puzzled.

"Uh… did they close up for the day because of some business?"

"Would someone close down a guild just because they have personal matters to attend to…?"

I said to Luna.

Even if one is the head of the guild, it would be unlikely for them to shut down the entire establishment.

"It's more likely that something has happened, right?"

Astina surveyed the surroundings calmly.

The passersby looked at us standing in front of the guild with curious gazes.

Rie looked around at the onlookers and then approached a lady.

"Hello there."

"Oh, yes… But who might you be…?"

"We're just people who have some business in the territory. I'm curious, do you know why the mercenary guild is in such a state?"

Rie asked with a friendly smile.

The lady hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"Thi… the head of the guild has caused some trouble, I heard. The Lord took him away this morning."

"The lord? But why is the guild's door closed?"

"I'm not sure myself… Maybe the guild committed some sort of crime?"

"The guild…"

As Rie was having this conversation, the surrounding people's attention focused even more intensely on us.

Robert, observing the situation, guided us.

"For now, let's go inside and think."

We found an inconspicuous inn and entered a room.

"What's going on?"

Rie said, her expression clouded with concern.

"We don't know. But wasn't he only getting information? How could they respond so quickly?"

The task Robert had entrusted to Jack was to gather information on Ephomos.

It was a matter of finding the necessary information.

Jack was a veteran who had climbed his way up to the head of the mercenary guild after spending a long time on the battlefield.

Could such a person be caught only within a few days of gathering information?

It was puzzling.

One might consider that some mishap could happen, but for the other party to notice so quickly and capture him seemed too odd.

Jack was not a figure under surveillance, merely a mercenary guild head.

Essentially, his position was no different from that of a street gang leader.

Robert pondered for a moment before speaking.

"There could be a few reasons."

"Reasons?"

"One possibility is that the fellow dug around in something sensitive enough to provoke a swift response. However, I consider this unlikely. Jack is savvy enough to avoid such blunders."

"Hmm…"

It was unlikely he was foolish enough to get caught for something trivial.

If he had truly been a fool, he never would have risen to the position of guild head.

Luna cocked her head in curiosity.

"Does that mean the lord of the territory has noticed something?"

"It may not necessarily be the territory lord who has found out,"

"Then, the empire?"

"No."

I spoke with certainty.

It was unlikely for the empire to respond so quickly, especially to an incident in a distant territory—I was confident about that.

Could it mean that the territory lord had unilaterally captured the mercenary guild head?

That didn't make sense either.

The mercenary guild head was said to be a figure not even a territory lord could easily meddle with.

Moreover, since even the empire had little details about Ephomos, it was difficult to figure out what information Jack was digging up.

Of course, if he searched the Astria family mansion, where information about Ephomos was hidden, they would obviously notice.

He would probably be caught on the spot.

The claim that the territory lord had captured him was thus disproven for such reasons.

Robert spoke softly.

"It must be the Rebels."

I agreed with him.

The information we had been trying to find was about Ephomos.

And the reason we were trying to find it was also because of the Rebels.

That person who had come to the academy, the one who used necromancy.

We were gathering information to find out more about him.

Considering those involved in the outer territories with Ephomos and those who could respond quickly, the Rebels were the only plausible group.

We were well aware that the Rebels were joining forces with the nobles on the outskirts.

It was a similar incident to what had happened during our first year at the academy.

"But even if they're the enemy…”

Rie said as she flopped onto the couch.

"What do we do now? Attack the lord?"

Astina shook her head.

"We don't have enough justification for that. On the contrary, we might be the ones who end up getting attacked. There's also no evidence linking this territory's lord to the Rebels, is there?"

"That's why we're deciding what to do now."

"We rescue Jack. We need to know what information he's managed to gather."

Robert rose from his seat and said,

"So, how do you propose we do this?"

"They say he was taken this morning, and if we delay, we don't know what will happen to him. Therefore, we ambush tonight."

Luna's eyes widened at these words.

“…An ambush!"

Luna, who exclaimed with sparkling eyes, quickly covered her mouth with her hands.

“…It's nothing."

Does she like this kind of thing…?

Robert turned his head with an impassive expression and looked at us.

"First, let's go buy robes to disguise ourselves. Since we're attacking at night, everyone should get some rest now."

"Understood."

CHAPTER 163
RESCUE OPERATION (2)

A man walked down the corridor, fiddling with his mustache.

This man was Pierro Gotram, the lord of the Gotram territory, holding the title of baron.

Although he managed the Gotram lands, he was not satisfied with just that.

'Finally, the opportunity has arrived'

As a lord on the outskirts, Gotram harbored ambitions, aspiring to succeed and manage a larger territory one day.

Such outskirt lords were so weak that they could hardly stand up to a head of a mercenary guild.

He craved power, but becoming a grand noble was out of reach due to his lacking capabilities.

His solution was to collaborate with the Rebels.

In every crisis, there was an opportunity.

He believed that if the Rebels could overturn the empire, he would be able to seize substantial power for himself.

As the Rebels started to gain traction, Gotram wasted no time in forming an alliance with them.

However, establishing a cooperative relationship didn't immediately bring the opportunity he was hoping for.

Despite his willingness to support the Rebels, his outskirt territory's limited power meant there was little he could do.

But then, the opportunity he was waiting for finally arrived.

A letter from the Rebels.

The message instructed him to capture Jack, the head of the mercenary guild in the Gotram territory.

Reading the letter, Gotram could not help but shout for joy.

He had the chance to get rid of a thorn in his side and aid the Rebels at the same time.

It was a win-win situation.

Without hesitation, he took action.

With the support of the Rebels, he captured Jack and sent a letter back to them.

In response, he received news that someone from the Rebels' headquarters would come to visit.

"Ahem."

Gotram cleared his throat as he entered the room to meet the representative from the Rebels.

Inside, he found a man with heavy dark circles under his eyes.

"Good day. I am Pierro Gotram, the baron and Lord of Gotram."

He introduced himself, trying to make a good impression.

The man, however, looked at him bluntly without showing any interest.

"I have successfully captured Jack, as you instructed. He is now imprisoned below, ready for you to take him away at any time."

He was really trying his best to make a good impression on the representative.

In contrast, the man from the Rebels' headquarters looked back at him with vacant

eyes.

'After all, he is just a commoner.'

Even if he was from the headquarters, he was still a commoner, and he was sure the man would be overwhelmed by the noble treatment.

Gotram clapped his hands, looking towards the door.

Soon, various lavish dishes were brought in.

"The job is done, let’s enjoy ourselves! Even though we are a outskirts territory, we've prepared a lot, knowing that someone from the headquarters would be visiting. Hahahaha!"

Gotram continued to fawn over the man.

All the while, the man from the Rebels' headquarters, Daemon—who could use necromancy—looked at Gotram with disdain.

He frowned, unimpressed by the display in front of him.

'Such a rat.'

He gave off a pathetic, rat-like impression.

Daemon clicked his tongue.

To think that a guy like this holds the title of a Lord.

It was utterly pathetic.

“I don’t need this. I’m staying the night and will take the guy with me tomorrow morning, so make sure you prepare for the transfer.”

“Ah… I will prepare everything to the best of my abilities!”

Lord Gotram’s face almost crumpled at Daemon’s arrogant attitude, but he managed to hide his expression as best as he could.

However, Daemon saw right through him.

Fawning over him to his face, but ready to stab him in the back at any moment.

It made him feel nauseous.

'Ha… If it weren't for Ephomos, I wouldn't have come here.'

Daemon looked at Baron Gotram and gestured toward the door.

Gotram, looking puzzled, caught his gesture.

Daemon said quietly,

"Get out."

"…Ah, understood."

Baron Gotram lowered his head to Daemon's threatening tone and obediently left the room.

Daemon watched him leave.

"Worthless scum."

To think that this kind of guy is strutting around, calling himself a noble.

If you don't have ability, you should at least have loyalty.

He betrayed the empire that granted him his noble status and clung to the rebels.

'Just endure until this is over.'

The rebels had no intention of accepting such men.

They were just pawns to be used and discarded.

When everything was over, they planned to eliminate them all.

Those who had committed crimes would be beheaded, and those who were

unnecessary would be expelled.

It was a natural step toward creating a new world.

Daemon brought his hand to his neck.

He lightly pulled out the necklace he was wearing and looked at it.

Hanging from the necklace was a ring, its shine faded.

“…Just wait a little longer.”

Daemon spoke to the ring, his words filled with determination.

"A commoner, how dare he. Argh…”

Lord Gotram, trying to suppress his anger, walked along the corridor.

Although he was part of the rebel leadership, his current status as Baron Gotram held more weight.

He was not pleased about having to speak politely and bow his head to someone else.

"That guy… once all this is over, I might be in a position above him."

Despite the man being a part of the rebel leadership, Gotram had spent more time in the political field.

There was no way that someone with such rude manners could survive in politics.

Even if Gotram might lose in a physical fight, he was confident in the political battles.

"We'll see about that later, whether you secure your position or I secure mine."

With a sinister smile, Baron Gotram moved towards the underground prison.

Although it was infuriating, he knew he had to bow his head to that man for now.

His plan was to nicely wrap up the Mercenary Guild head and hand him over.

While Baron Gotram was thinking about this, a loud explosion came from outside.

Bang!

Simultaneously, screams could be heard.

"What the…?"

Surprised by the sudden noise, Gotram's eyes widened.

A soldier was running towards him from a distance.

"Lord, my Lord!"

"What is going on?"

"Sir, it's an ambush! Some strange guy has entered the mansion!"

"A strange guy?"

Baron Gotram frowned.

Could it be someone coming to save that guy, Jack?

"How many are there?"

"Th… That…"

The soldier hesitated at the lord's question.

"Can't you speak faster?"

"…Just one."

"…What?"

Lord Gotram's annoyance surged upon hearing this.

He was already angry because of the rebel guy, and now a single person has attacked, causing all this commotion.

"Then capture him quickly and throw him into the underground prison! We have soldiers from the central here to support us, don't we?"

He mentioned soldiers from the central as support, but in reality, they were rebels.

Since he couldn't openly bring rebels into his territory, he had made up an excuse for the lower-ranked people.

"Th… Those soldiers are also joining the fight."

"What?"

The rebels were helping too.

Soldiers from the territory were also fighting.

"Then you're saying you've captured him?"

"No, sir! The one who attacked is too strong! We need support right away…"

"But it's just one person! It's only one person!"

"He… He's a wizard. The soldiers can't cope with him because he's a wizard! If this continues, the damage could get worse."

"Tch. Then send other soldiers…"

Lord Gotram started to say he would send support but then stopped mid-sentence.

"Is there only one intruder?"

"Uh…"

Upon hearing this, the soldier stopped his speech.

There was only one person confronting them in front of the mansion, but it was uncertain how many more might be present.

“Haha…”

Lord Gotram chuckled as he watched the hesitating soldier.

"Tell them to reinforce the security in the underground prison immediately."

The guy in front of the mansion was a decoy.

Their real intention must be to sneak out Jack from the underground prison.

He had no intention of falling for their trick.

“But, if we strengthen that area, the damages will be…”

As the soldier spoke, Lord Gotram's eyes widened in anger.

“Are you arguing with my orders? Do you have a death wish?”

“…No, I’m not. I’ll go deliver the message right now.”

As the soldier was about to leave, he was stopped.

“Wait a moment.”

Lord Gotram turned his head to look at the soldier.

The soldier looked back at Gotram with a slightly cold expression.

“Is there something you want to say?”

Gotram felt a chilling sensation running down his spine.

'Am I not feeling well?'

However, he didn't think that this feeling was caused by the soldier.

Shaking his head, he spoke.

"Tell the guest in the guest room at the end of the corridor as well. An intruder who intends to capture the criminal has appeared."

Gotram spoke with a smile.

The rebels would be sensitive to any information that Jack might have discovered.

If Jack disappears, it's the rebels who would be in trouble, not him.

It was certain that he would come help.

He didn't know the true capabilities of the person in that room, but regardless, it didn't matter.

If they failed to protect Jack, they could just blame Daemon.

If they succeeded, all the better.

Secretly, Lord Gotram hoped that Daemon would suffer a great blow.

"Understood…"

After responding, the soldier started to run out of sight.

Lord Gotram watched him leave with a sinister smile.

'I'll just hide somewhere else and show up after everything is over. After all, their target is Jack.'

With that thought, Lord Gotram looked for a place to hide and walked away.

As Lord Gotram disappeared, the soldier, who had received orders from him, was moving quickly.

The soldier ran down the corridor, then stopped to look around.

Confirming that no one was around, he slowed his pace.

The soldier stopped, looked at the place where Lord Gotram had disappeared, and smirked.

"…What an idiot."

As the soldier muttered to himself, his appearance gradually changed, and he transformed into a blonde woman.

A blonde woman in a robe.

It was Rie.

The illusion magic that Luna had cast had worn off, and she had returned to her original form.

"Why is Astina taking so long to get things started?"

Her illusion almost reverted in front of the Lord.

Rie looked outside the window with an annoyed expression.

Outside, Astina, clad in a robe and wearing a mask, was visible.

She was dealing with the soldiers using basic magic.

“More importantly, there is a guest…”

Rie didn't know who the guest was, but she suspected it might be someone from the Rebels.

Looking outside, she saw some soldiers who didn't belong to the territory.

These soldiers, dressed more shabbily than those from the territory, were however, performing better in battle.

The lord claimed they were from central, but just by their clothes, it was clear that these weren’t soldiers from the central forces.

From that, she thought the guest might be someone from the Rebels leading those soldiers.

‘First, I should join up with Rudy.’

Rie turned around and started running toward the underground prison, a smile playing on her lips.

CHAPTER 164
RESCUE OPERATION (3)

"Hmm…”

"Identify yourself!!!"

Astina stretched and walked forward.

'By this time, they should all be ready.'

She surveyed her surroundings.

Having broken through the main gate, many soldiers stood before her.

Because she needed to conceal her identity, she couldn't use her telekinetic magic.

But there was no need for that—not for these small fries.

"Wind Blaster."

A fierce wind howled through, like a tempest.

"A wizard!!!"

"Agh!!!"

The soldiers' eyes bulged at the sight of Astina's magic.

Wizards were elite talents, welcomed everywhere.

Such beings were rare in these rural parts.

The soldiers were in disarray, unprepared for an ambush by a wizard.

"There's only one of her! Stay calm and handle this!"

"Pfft!"

Astina couldn't help but laugh at their command.

These soldiers knew not the terror of a wizard.

A single wizard could take on hundreds, even thousands.

That was the might of a wizard.

There was a clear distinction between them and the common people.

Furthermore, the level of any countryside wizard compared to Astina was like heaven and earth.

Astina was a wizard who could wipe out thousands with a mere flick of her finger.

These soldiers were no match for her.

"Everyone, keep your cool. She's a wizard, so there will be an opening when she casts her spells. Aim for that."

In the midst of the soldiers' panic, some composed figures could be seen.

They wore different attire from the rest—shabbier, yet they responded to the wizard with seasoned calm.

Astina, observing this, posed a question.

"Who might you be?"

The shabbily dressed soldiers did not answer.

They clenched their jaws, ready to charge at her.

"Hmm…"

Astina regarded them with a leisurely gaze.

"I'll know once I've taken you all down."

Her task was simple.

Attract attention and defeat all the enemies before her.

Nothing more.

Astina, smiling, began to speak.

"10 seconds."

She spread her hands wide, showing them to the soldiers.

"Try to last 10 seconds."

"What?"

It might have sounded arrogant, overbearing.

But Astina was sincere.

Her judgment was objective, unemotional.

She knew these men couldn't last 10 seconds against her.

That was the objective difference between Astina and the soldiers.

After her statement, Astina immediately began her incantation.

"Wind Blaster."

Behind the Gotram mansion, on the path to the underground prison.

"Who, who goes there?!"

Bang—

It was a single punch.

Robert sent the soldier flying far off.

"This is no ambush. This… isn't an ambush…”

Luna murmured, her face sullen.

I shared Luna's sentiment.

The plan was simple: place Astina up front to draw the gaze, and we slip into the prison amidst the distraction.

Rie would sow confusion among the lord's forces to prevent them from responding properly.

That was the strategy.

But now, looking at the situation, I wondered if it was even necessary.

Our foes couldn't touch us.

We didn't even bother to hide.

We walked in boldly and overpowered them with ease.

We hadn't hidden ourselves since crossing the mansion's wall to the prison.

If the enemy can't stop us, why bother concealing our approach?

Luna seemed to have expected something more from the ambush, but now she wore a face of slight disappointment.

I opened my mouth, forcing a smile.

"At least it looks like things will be easy. I was worried for nothing."

The idea of staging an ambush to rescue someone had weighed on us.

But as the situation unfolded with such ease, relief washed over me.

Robert cast a look of mild disdain my way.

"What did you expect from an attack on a mere countryside noble?"

As we continued to converse and move forward, some soldiers emerged.

"Ugh… Aaahh!"

"The enemy…!"

They fled at the sight of us.

A wise decision, in its own way.

No matter how much they resisted, they couldn't hope to win against us.

But Robert didn't let them escape.

"Where do you think you're running off to?"

He pursued the soldier swiftly and swung his fist.

The fleeing soldier, showing his back, had no chance to avoid the attack and was smashed against the wall.

It was a merciless strike.

Although it was a logical decision since fleeing soldiers could cause problems, after witnessing such scenes repeatedly, pity for the soldiers began to seep in.

"Perhaps we didn't need a strategy after all…"

"Strategies are always crafted to prepare for the worst-case scenario. How do we know if some of the Rebels aren't here?"

"…Then shouldn't you, Professor, have taken the front?"

Astina might be strong, but she was not on Robert's level.

The front was where the focus was, where the strongest enemy would surely appear.

"Sending Astina out front wasn't because she's the strongest among you."

Robert looked at me.

"It's all about playing our respective roles."

I tilted my head, contemplating his words.

Continuing our descent, no more soldiers could be seen as we went further down.

Eventually, the stairs led us to a vast space where the soldiers were congregated.

At first, I thought perhaps they had split into two paths in their flight, but that wasn't the case.

Did they believe they had a fighting chance in this spacious area?

The mood, however, wasn't one of hopeful strategy.

All their faces were brimming with confidence.

"There must be something here."

It was obvious to anyone looking.

An unpleasant energy could be felt emanating from the end of the space.

Clank— Clank—

From behind the soldiers, someone was approaching.

This figure was clad in black full plate armor, holding a sword that gleamed with darkness.

"There's… a strange sensation."

Luna hesitated as she looked at the person.

I felt I knew what she was sensing.

Powerful Wizards or swordsmen exude mana.

A large, overwhelming presence of mana…

In contrast, this person's mana had a different quality.

It was sticky and dark, so repulsive it furrowed our brows.

It was difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of the feeling, but it was undeniably distasteful.

As Luna and I grimaced, Robert opened his mouth to speak.

"It's a Death Knight."

"What?"

"A creature resurrected through necromancy."

Robert began to walk forward.

"Seeing a Death Knight as a guard here, it seems Jack has dug up some accurate information."

After stating this, Robert turned to look at me.

"Rudy Astria, watch and learn."

"What?"

Suddenly, the Death Knight charged at us with incredible speed.

It swung its sword horizontally, aiming directly at Robert.

"Professor…!"

Before I could shout out a warning, Robert had already moved.

He twisted his body to dodge the blade and slipped inside the Death Knight's guard.

"I'll show you how to counter necromancy right now."

He spoke and then targeted the Death Knight's arm.

"Target their joints."

If one had gotten inside a person's guard, targeting the torso would have been efficient.

But Robert chose differently.

He aimed for the bending part of the arm that held the sword.

With a powerful punch, he struck the seam of the armor.

Crack—

The sound of shattering metal resonated through the air.

The Death Knight's armored arm was shattered to pieces.

It was well-known that armor seams were vulnerable.

However, this was different from breaking the armor of a living person.

The connected joint easily crumbled, and the arm itself was gone.

A person's arm wouldn't just disappear like that, not with skin and flesh and bone.

The sword, propelled by momentum, flew far away.

Reacting to this, the Death Knight raised its leg, attempting to strike Robert with its knee.

"Secondly, creatures resurrected by necromancy do not feel pain,"

Robert stated as he effortlessly blocked a knee strike, his movements showing he predicted the attack.

"They don't feel pain, so regardless of what happens, they will persist in their assault."

He continued, pushing away the Death Knight's knee and swiftly pivoting, his leg rising in a high arc aimed precisely at the Death Knight's head.

With a fluid motion, there was a sickening crunch as the helmet shattered under the force, revealing the crumbled skull within.

Robert then stepped back, but the battle was far from over.

Despite its head being crushed, the Death Knight remained undeterred, still moving.

"Finally."

The Death Knight, despite its ruined form, charged toward him once more.

This time, Robert manipulated his mana and invoked,

"Hand of the Abyss."

The Death Knight's advance came to an abrupt stop as black hands emerged from the ground, grasping its legs.

These hands multiplied, extending to ensnare the Death Knight from legs to body, to arms, and finally the head, pulling it toward the ground.

With the Death Knight immobilized by the dark appendages, it emitted a bizarre sound.

Robert then placed his foot atop the Death Knight's chest, crushing the armor to reveal the contents inside.

Visible among the remains were ribs, possibly human, and at the heart's position, a black orb-like object.

Touching the orb lightly, Robert explained,

"Thirdly, all beings resurrected by necromancy possess a core. That is the core."

Looking at us, he elaborated,

"Once that core is destroyed, this creature can no longer move. It's the most

straightforward and effective method."

“…Then why didn't you destroy it from the beginning?"

"To teach you. Plus destroying it immediately would alert the necromancer who cast the spell."

Despite its struggle, the Death Knight was helpless.

Robert gazed intently at the well-crafted Death Knight.

"It's better made than I expected. Is 'he' here?"

“…A well-made Death Knight?"

I mused, finding it oddly easy to defeat.

I was slightly confused but assumed Robert must be correct in his assessment.

"Could it be a necromancer from Ephomos?"

"It might not be. I suspect there's another necromancer among the Rebels, though I doubt they could create something of this standard."

Robert said, then turned his attention forward.

Before us stood soldiers shaking with terror.

Having seen Robert toy with and then smash the Death Knight, their fear was understandable.

Robert glanced at the soldiers and clenched his fist, then chuckled.

"Let's not be a nuisance. Just take a hit and go down quietly."

It was a remark both kind and ruthless.

CHAPTER 165
RESCUE OPERATION (4)

"What's this guy up to?"

Daemon had not yet fully comprehended the situation.

He wasn't overly concerned when he learned that the head of the Mercenary Guild had dug up some information.

With his power, he could easily suppress the Mercenary Guild, so he thought if someone came to rescue the captive, he could easily thwart them.

But the person outside was not of that caliber.

A wizard who had hidden their appearance with a robe and had taken down all the soldiers.

The magic they wielded was unremarkable, but the mana seeping from their body indicated they were no ordinary wizard.

They were concealing their true power.

Therefore, even Daemon couldn't rashly intervene.

Daemon clicked his tongue in frustration.

"I'm going to hear it from the leader when I get back."

Not only the soldiers at the mansion but also the rebel soldiers he had brought were down.

He had brought only the most agile and skilled soldiers as his elite force.

However, they were no match for that wizard.

Each fallen comrade was a painful loss for the rebels.

Still, he couldn't make his move.

There could be hidden allies, and victory over that wizard was uncertain.

A necromancer fights with an army prepared in advance.

This kind of battle was unfavorable.

Even if he couldn't save the soldiers, it was right to prioritize his own safety.

It was Daemon's oversight.

He had erred by not anticipating the appearance of such a skilled adversary and by creating an opening from trying to handle things quickly.

"It's better to plan for the future."

There was no benefit in engaging with such an opponent.

It was best to remain safe until the dust settled.

"Death Knight."

As Daemon manipulated his mana, he commanded.

"Bring the head of the Mercenary Guild to me."

He sent a command to the Death Knight in the underground prison through mana.

He planned to escape swiftly, avoiding confrontation with the intruder.

The battle was a victory as long as the others didn't get information about Ephomos from him.

Daemon made his exit through the back.

He waited for the Death Knight behind the mansion.

But something was off.

The Death Knight did not arrive.

It was well past the time he should have been there.

"Huh…"

He could tell that things had gone seriously wrong.

Had the underground prison already been breached?

"I can't just stay put."

Daemon's arrival here was his own action.

Not even Aryandor, the leader, nor the other executives were aware of it.

Ephomos was unrelated to the rebels and so he acted alone.

He must not get caught here.

Daemon's capture alone would deal a great blow to the rebels.

Daemon clenched his jaw with regret.

"I should have killed him immediately after he got captured."

Not executing Jack instantly was his blunder.

His arrogance had been in trying to take the man back to the Rebels to extract information.

Daemon made a decision.

He must flee first.

The core of the Death Knight remained intact.

However, its lack of response indicated it was certainly bound by some restraint.

Someone was knowledgeable about necromantic magic.

They had acted discreetly to avoid detection.

Then, there was no point in fighting; the odds were against him.

But Daemon didn't intend to just run away.

At the very least, he had to eliminate the one who held the information.

He reached into his pocket.

Inside, there was a single black orb.

Daemon placed the orb on the ground and began to chant.

"Rise, the dead… entwine and rise once more."

His mana was drawn into the soil.

"Death Golem."

Bones began to rise, weaving together from the ground.

Daemon observed the forming golem and commanded.

"Kill the head of the Mercenary Guild."

In the underground prison…

"Heh heh heh… Kuhuhuhu… I thought I was a goner for sure…"

Jack was a mess of tears and snot as he clung to Robert.

"Don't stick to me, damn it. We've got to get out of here, now."

Robert, clearly irritated, pushed Jack away with his foot.

Luna and I couldn't help but laugh at the sight.

Jack didn't seem to have any serious injuries.

A small bruise on his face and marks on his arms from being tied up were all that was evident.

I took a look around the prison.

It seemed to be somewhat tidied up.

The Death Knight was immobilized, and the soldiers were all downed.

All we had to do now was escape.

"So, now we…"

Boom—

That's when it happened.

As I was about to speak, a deep rumbling resonated through the prison.

"What's that?"

The ceiling shook, and dust began to fall.

There had been a large impact from outside.

I could hear someone running quickly toward the prison.

"Rudy!! Are you there??"

"Rie?"

Her voice echoed down the staircase.

"Hey!! Get up here!!! There's big trouble!!"

Rie sounded incredibly urgent.

At her call, we all rushed outside.

There stood Rie, with a scowl on her face.

"What's going on?"

Without answering, Rie reached out her hand.

"Over…"

"Gravity!"

Astina was floating, using her telekinesis.

In front of her was a massive entity.

It was a monster resembling a large face, formed from intertwined skeletons, with several arms jutting out, moving in bizarre ways.

Moreover, its size was so immense it nearly rivaled the mansion itself.

"What is that?"

"I don't know. It just appeared and started smashing everything."

The half-demolished mansion was visible.

"Astina's been keeping it from moving toward the village but…"

I removed the mask covering my face and rolled up my sleeves.

"We can't just leave it be."

"I'll help!"

Luna also took a spellbook from her bag.

Just as we prepared to confront the situation…

"Hm?"

The giant creature turned its body.

“…Why does it seem to be looking right at us?"

"It does seem to be… doesn't it?"

"What?"

As we stood perplexed, a strange noise emanated from the creature.

"Graaaaah…!"

The monster suddenly pivoted and began advancing towards us.

It closed the distance rapidly.

"Why is it suddenly coming at us?"

"I don't know! Just block it!"

I asked, and Rie, frowning, began to manipulate her mana.

A small flame burst from Rie's hand, which she hurled at the approaching monstrosity.

I was also moved to act, channeling my mana.

"Finger of the Demon!"

A colossal pillar burst forth from the ground, an attempt to stop the monster in its tracks.

Boom—

Rie's spell hit the creature dead-on, causing a significant explosion.

The pillar I had conjured was placed precisely in the monster's path.

"Graaaah…!"

Yet, it proved futile.

The creature seemed unaffected by Rie's magic, and the pillar I erected broke like a twig against its movement.

As we prepared to cast another round of spells, Robert, standing beside me, reached out his hand.

"Stop. Don't waste your mana."

"What?"

He glanced over at Luna and Rie.

"Luna, Rie. Take Jack and get to the back."

"What?"

"But we can also…"

Robert frowned at the two of them.

"You won't be of help. And can't you see what that monster is targeting?"

The rampaging creature, having been indiscriminately destroying, now turned its focus towards us.

It had a target among us.

The most likely candidate was Jack, given that the enemy didn't even know who we were.

"Just protect Jack. And…"

He then turned to look at me.

"Rudy Astria, follow me."

"Me?"

In Robert's grasp was a staff of indeterminate origin.

It was of a peculiar length, neither long nor short, about the size of a human arm, white and without any adornment.

Staff in hand, Robert lunged towards the monster.

Without a second thought, I followed Robert towards the creature.

As Robert charged, the monster moved its arm to knock him away.

"Huh!"

Robert targeted the arm moving towards him, pointing the staff's tip forward like a blade.

The tip of the staff illuminated brightly.

With that illuminated tip, Robert stabbed at the monster's arm that was trying to hit him.

Zzzt!!!

Upon contact with the staff, the monster's limb disintegrated.

One of its giant arms decomposed upon mere contact with the staff, with neither a forceful impact nor an explosion.

"What in the…"

I watched, my eyes wide in shock.

Robert, having destroyed the arm, descended to the ground and then looked up to shout.

"Astina!!!!! Stop its movements!"

"Understood."

Astina responded to Robert's call to action.

After hearing her reply, Robert turned to look at me.

"Rudy Astria, did you see that?"

"I saw it."

"I'll breach the monster with this staff. You go in and smash the core inside."

"There's a core inside it?"

"Didn't I tell you during the lesson? A core exists. We can't hold back such a massive body, so we must aim for the core."

I nodded at Robert's explanation and opened my mouth to speak.

"Understood. But…”

"What's wrong? Out with it."

"What is that staff?"

I pointed to the white staff in Robert's hand.

"It's my staff for handling monsters like this one."

Robert said, tapping the staff lightly.

The sight felt like that of a teacher instilling fear in students with a ruler.

But this was a staff?

It looked nothing like the staffs I was familiar with.

There were no mana stones in sight, nor did it seem to be a conduit for casting spells.

Many questions arose, but now was not the time for them.

Robert looked at me and opened his mouth to speak.

"Then, do you think you can do it?"

I smiled slightly.

"Is there another option? If my teacher instructs, I act."

Robert snickered at my response.

"Then follow me."

CHAPTER 166
RESCUE OPERATION (5)

Hundreds of bones and clumps of mud formed a monstrous body, from which dozens of arms protruded.

The arms were no different in composition from the body.

They tried to swat away Robert, who was charging towards them.

However, it was futile.

"Gravity."

The arms trying to block Robert were knocked away by Astina.

Simultaneously pushing the arms away, she used other magic.

"Pressure Field."

Astina immobilized the monstrous body to prevent it from moving.

The monster thrashed in response to Astina's magic, but it couldn't break free.

Robert charged straight towards the restrained monster.

I followed behind him.

Robert held out the staff in his hand.

Then, he used a spell.

"Finger of the Demon."

A black pillar rose from the ground.

It did not erect straight up but formed a path leading towards the monster.

Robert climbed atop the pillar and started running.

That’s when he reached near the body of the monster.

"Rudy Astria, I don’t know where its core is. I’ll pierce through its body; you find the core."

"Understood."

I responded to Robert’s words.

Robert gripped the staff tightly and thrust it towards the monster.

As the tip of the staff touched the monster, cracks began to spread across its entire body.

"Rudy."

At Robert’s call, I manipulated my mana.

At the very least, find the core.

If possible, destroy it.

I repeated it in my mind several times.

The crack created by Robert gradually widened, and the entire body began to disintegrate.

Crash!

As the monster's body shattered into pieces, the mud and bone fragments that constituted its body scattered around.

I opened my eyes wide in awe of that power.

What on earth was the capability of that staff to unleash such a formidable power?

Could Robert alone win with this?

However, there was no time to be astonished by Robert’s abilities.

Finding the core, as Robert had mentioned, was the priority.

I focused and looked around.

Unlike the Death Knight, which had its core in the center of its body, the monster's core was not visible in the center.

That meant the core must be somewhere within its body parts.

I scanned the surroundings.

I had to find where the strong mana was concentrated.

I recalled the feeling Luna and I had when we encountered the Death Knight.

I needed to find mana that gave off a sticky and unpleasant feeling.

However, the mana was spread throughout the entire body.

Since mana was what constituted and moved its body, that was a given.

Nevertheless, I had to find it.

Find where it felt the most distinct.

Find where the strong mana was.

That’s when a hand was placed on my shoulder.

It was Robert.

He was breathing heavily.

Having shattered that gigantic body, he seemed to have used a lot of mana.

Even in his fatigue, he did not hold back his advice.

"Focus. Feel the mana."

"Don't rely on your sight. Find it with your own senses."

I continued to concentrate while listening to Robert's words.

As I focused and scanned my surroundings, I looked at a skull lying far away.

The skull felt different from the fragments around it.

There was no concrete evidence.

It was just a feeling.

I quickly moved my mana.

"Dark Spear."

A black spear slowly formed in my hand.

It was a spell I could use quickly.

Robert opened his mouth as he saw this.

"Have you found it?"

There was no time to answer.

I immediately threw the spear at the skull.

The spear flew at a high speed.

However, it did not reach the skull.

"Ah…!"

The bone fragments beside the skull transformed into a hand and grabbed the spear.

Robert also smiled as he saw this.

"So it's that one."

The bone fragments that blocked the spear started to gather around the skull again.

The bones, along with the dirt on the ground, started to clump together again, transforming into a giant body.

"Is it regenerating?"

"That’s right. Since it can't use magic or other abilities, it has excellent recovery capabilities."

I nodded as I saw this.

Robert caught his rough breath and spoke again.

"The core is not a hard substance. It's an object condensed with mana. Think of it as attacking to break a mana stone."

"Remember the sensation of finding the core. And find out to what extent it can block magic. I'll break through it no matter how many times it takes."

I shook my head and smiled at his words.

This advice was enough.

Now was the time to repay Robert for his teachings.

"I think it will be enough in the next attempt."

I had no intention of troubling Robert numerous times.

Robert looked at me with sharp eyes.

“…Are you prepared to say such a thing?"

"Of course."

I was confident.

I would mobilize all the knowledge I had accumulated so far.

I would pour them all into this attempt.

I would not think about mistakes.

I would only aim for success.

Of course, with Robert, Astina, Luna, and Rie around me, I could afford to make many attempts.

My acquaintances would give me another chance.

However, I shouldn't rely entirely on them.

Although I have several attempts now, it might not be the case next time.

There will often be times when only one chance is given.

I have already failed once, and this is my second chance given.

So, failure is not an option.

I will finish it this time.

Robert once again picked up his staff and loosened up his body.

As he prepared again, I took a deep breath.

“Phew!”

I brushed off my sleeves and recalled what just happened.

Remember the sensation.

I felt a distinct mana in the surroundings, different from just a moment ago.

It came with a flash of realization, as if I had just discovered something new.

I must remember this feeling.

I decided to take on the challenge with the mindset that this could be my last attempt, thinking that everything would be over if I failed.

In front of me, a monster was squirming as it regenerated.

Robert fiddled with his staff a few times.

Then, as a small light appeared from the staff, he looked at me.

“Ready.”

“I’m ready as well.”

Hearing my response, Robert took the lead and walked forward.

The monster in front of us now had more mud than bones in its composition, squirming like slime.

Instead of the arms that appeared before, there were now tentacles made of mud surrounding it.

The tentacles tried to block our way, just like before.

Astina, seeing us move, used her magic again.

But, unlike before, it wasn’t easily blocked.

Even when pushed back with telekinetic magic, the tentacles flexibly evaded the magic and targeted us, as if they had learned from our previous encounter.

“Astina! Focus on immobilizing its main body, not the tentacles!”

Robert shouted, looking up at the sky.

The creature’s body had become more flexible as it mixed with the mud.

Fixing its flexible body in place was a tough task, hence the need to concentrate on one thing.

I roughly understood Robert’s intention, but Astina seemed slightly offended,

furrowing her brow.

“Understood.”

After speaking in a voice tinged with frustration, Astina flew upwards.

Then she moved a massive amount of mana.

“Gravity Field.”

Seeing this, Robert prepared to run forward.

“Dodge everything and proceed.”

I gathered mana in my legs, pushing my physical abilities beyond their normal limits.

“Huff…!”

Robert dashed forward, moving faster than me.

I followed a bit more slowly.

I concentrated even before Robert began to break apart the monster’s body.

Although its body was tightly packed, there surely was a core somewhere within.

And this core felt distinctly different from the other parts of its body.

I focused, looking at the whole while searching for the part.

Concentrating, I aimed to pierce through at a single point.

“Rudy Astria!”

Robert broke through the tentacles and reached the monster in an instant, with intense light emanating from his staff.

“Give it a try.”

As the staff touched the monster, its body cracked like before, splitting into parts.

Despite the urgent situation, I closed my eyes.

I scanned the surroundings, not with my eyes, but with my senses.

I read the flow of mana, finding the sticky, dark flow of mana.

And then…

“I’ve found it.”

I read the location precisely.

Top right.

Next to the third tentacle from the top.

I opened my eyes and confirmed the exact location.

Then, I dashed forward.

Gathering mana in my legs, I burst forward.

I had to pierce through its body shattered and scattered around.

“Ugh…”

But my speed was too slow.

The amount of mana I could use at once was limited, so I couldn’t invest too much in my legs.

I made a quick decision and shouted.

“Priscilla!”

And so, I chose Priscilla.

Using Priscilla doesn’t consume a lot of mana as long as I don’t use the elemental’s power.

Then, blue smoke gathered in front of me, and a wolf with a mix of silver and blue appeared.

Without a moment to speak, I climbed onto Priscilla's back.

"What are you doing…?"

"Run! It's to the top right of that monster!"

Priscilla looked bewildered, but there was no time to explain.

As I shouted, Priscilla moved as instructed.

"I am a elemental, not a mount."

Of course, she didn't forget to grumble.

Despite her protest, she was much faster than my running speed.

The rift that Robert created was gradually widening, and it was almost time for it to completely crumble.

I tapped on Priscilla's back and spoke.

"Priscilla, we need to go up."

The monster's body was as tall as a three-story building.

There was no footing around, so Priscilla couldn't jump up.

"Phew…"

Priscilla sighed at my words.

"I will lift you as high as possible."

"Thanks. I'll take you for a long walk when this is over."

Priscilla sharpened her claws and charged at the monster.

Using the momentum from her run, she climbed up the monster.

As we quickly ascended, the monster's body started to crumble.

Its body was made of mud, so it scattered and couldn't be used as a foothold.

The part Priscilla was stepping on disappeared.

I then moved my feet to Priscilla's back.

"Here goes."

"Alright."

We moved in sync, as if we had agreed upon our actions beforehand.

I used Priscilla's back as a stepping stone and pushed myself up.

Then, I gathered mana in my feet and jumped.

At the same time, Priscilla pushed me forward.

Directly towards the direction where I could feel the core.

Bang—

"Ugh…"

With a slight groan from the impact, Priscilla fell to the ground.

"Don't forget about the walk."

She fell to the ground, her body dispersing like smoke.

Thanks to Priscilla's push, my body was propelled into the air.

In mid-air, I gathered mana in my hand.

No, to be precise, I gathered mana in my index finger.

The core wasn't that big.

From what I heard from Robert, it was definitely protected by mana.

Then, I must pierce through a small point.

I will pierce through the core, which is heavily protected by mana, at one point.

Gathering mana at my fingertips, I waited for the right timing as the core was falling.

Amidst the soft, muddy ground.

A small skull appeared.

It was clear as day.

It's coming closer.

Right in front of me.

And then,

"In one go."

I pierce through.

As soon as the skull reached in front of me, I concentrated on one point of my finger.

I thrust my arm forward.

CHAPTER 167
HEAD (1)

Dawn breaks.

A bright light spreads across the once-dark surroundings.

The mansion lies half in ruins, with mud and bone fragments scattered around in disarray.

"What a mess,"

Astina remarked, landing gracefully from the sky.

"At least the monster didn't reach the village."

The village remains untouched, with only the lord's mansion and its surroundings affected.

"Hey! Are you okay?"

"Rudy!"

Luna and Rie rush over from behind.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

I reply, managing a smile for them.

"Did you push yourself too hard? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Hm? Not really."

The monster wasn't as strong as we thought, so I wasn't seriously injured.

Of course, it's likely because Astina skillfully thwarted the monster's attacks.

Then Robert gives me a light pat on the back.

"Good job."

He says, smiling warmly.

After dawn, the area around the mansion became bustling.

"Help me clean this up!"

"Got it!"

With the villagers' assistance, we set about clearing the debris of the collapsed mansion and removing mud.

Though we wondered if it was our responsibility, the situation demanded it.

When the monster demolished the mansion, the lord hiding inside perished.

Since he was a lord condemned to death for colluding with the rebels, there was no sentiment of mourning.

Though it was unclear how much this outskirts lord knew, interrogating him might have yielded valuable information.

It was a regrettable loss.

But first things first, we had to manage the lord's territory.

We needed to clean up the wreckage and handle the aftermath.

Rie, leveraging her status as a princess, had already mobilized the villagers and soldiers for the task.

So, we began restoring the ruined mansion and tidying the surroundings.

But Rie couldn't stay in this territory indefinitely.

"Should we ask Luna’s parents to step in?"

Luna’s eyes widened at Rie's suggestion.

"Usually, a neighboring lord takes over in such situations."

"I know, but…”

When a lord dies suddenly or lacks a successor, a neighboring lord typically assumes the duties.

However, that wasn't the end of it.

Often, the lord who serves as regent ends up receiving the territory, especially in outlying areas like this.

"Wouldn’t managing two territories be too taxing?"

Luna voiced her concern.

I responded with a smile to her worry.

Most would rejoice at the prospect of gaining a territory, but Luna was more concerned about her parents.

"With Jack there, the workload shouldn’t be too burdensome."

"Besides, the central government will handle the recent incident. They’ll only need to manage the usual lordly duties. There’s no need to worry."

Rie and Robert reassured Luna.

"I can handle it! I’m a native of this territory, so I know it well!"

Jack declared confidently, thumping his chest.

Robert looked at Jack with a mix of disdain and amusement.

"What can you really do? At best, you’re just a local troublemaker."

"Oh, you don’t understand. In small towns like this, the role of a troublemaker is crucial."

"Fine. Try it your way. But still…”

Robert crossed his arms and fixed Jack with a stern gaze.

"What exactly is this critical information you've uncovered that led to all this? You mentioned direct rebel involvement, which sounds important."

"Oh, that?"

Jack grinned, flashing a row of white teeth.

"I've stumbled upon some incredible information."

"Incredible information?"

"It’s about the connection between the trashy Wizards of Ephomos and the Astria Duke Family!"

At that revelation, we all widened our eyes in surprise.

And then, everyone except Robert and Jack turned to look at me.

Robert, gazing at Jack, asked,

"What kind of connection are we talking about?"

Jack let out a derisive snort,

"Those Astrias, they're nothing but trash! Do you have any idea what they've been up to?"

"So, what exactly did they do?"

Jack, arms folded, looked upwards as if deep in thought.

"Well… Levian disbanded Ephomos, right? And chased you out? It was then that the fleeing residents and necromancers of Ephomos were taken in by the Astria family."

"Not just the necromancers, but the residents too?"

"Yes, they didn't take in everyone, but they certainly took a good number of them."

Jack said with a voice filled with outrage,

"Do you know what they did with those residents? They used them all for experiments and killed them! I'm telling you, it's outrageous! Handing them all over to the necromancers as experimental subjects."

"Mana stones, maybe…"

Robert muttered, his expression turning grim.

Levian had dismantled Ephomos, and I had wondered where all those residents went.

It turned out they were all hidden by the Astria family.

It was hard to say whether Levian knew about this.

It seemed more likely that he didn't.

If he had, neither the Empire nor other noble families would have stayed silent.

"That despicable Astria family. Just hearing about them makes me want to kick their backsides. If those guys were in front of me…"

"Enough, that's enough."

"Why should I stop? They deserve much worse! We must expose them! Just the sight of 'Astria' grinds my gears!

We should annihilate the entire family…"

I forced an awkward smile at this.

I should have disclosed my family name when I introduced myself.

What should I do now…

I was completely unaware of the atrocities committed by the Astria family.

Everything being discussed happened before I entered this body, so naturally, I was ignorant.

These were events I couldn't have stopped even if I had wanted to.

Therefore, I didn't take Jack's words to heart.

It wasn't personal, after all.

But it seemed not everyone around felt the same way.

Everyone, except for Jack and Robert, was glancing at me warily.

"Those Astrias…"

Then Luna cautiously spoke up, "Um…"

"Yes?"

"Rudy is here, you know…"

"Rudy? Oh right, his name is Rudy. What about it?"

"He's… from the Astria family…"

"Uh?"

Jack's eyes widened at that revelation.

He swallowed hard, then cautiously asked,

"Is he… like from a vassal family under the Astrias or something?"

I wondered if I should have kept it hidden…

"No, I am Rudy Astria, the second son of the Astria family."

Silence ensued.

After a brief commotion…

Jack tearfully pleaded for forgiveness from me, begging not to be killed.

It was only after I assured him that I had no significant ties with the Astria family's actions that he finally calmed down.

My position was indeed a bit precarious.

Although I was part of the Astria family, I had no real influence or control within it.

However, this detached position seemed to be an advantage at the moment.

It meant I didn't have a part in the family's wrongdoings.

"Time to head back, right?"

With Luna's parents and Jack handling things here, it was time for us to return.

There was plenty to do with the information Jack had provided, along with many other tasks.

The end of the break was approaching, and we had to get ready for the upcoming assessments.

There were also staff-related matters to look into.

"Ah."

A question suddenly struck me.

"Professor Robert?"

Robert, who was walking ahead, turned around.

"Yes?"

"I wanted to ask about the staff you used during the battle with the monster."

"Oh, this one?"

Robert said, pulling out the staff from his cloak.

It was short enough to fit inside his clothing.

"May I take a closer look at it?"

"Sure."

Robert tossed me the staff.

It was a white staff, its material a mystery to me.

I looked up at Robert curiously.

"How did you make this?"

"It's essentially a chunk of mana stone. This staff has the ability to break non-living objects in one strike."

"Really?"

"It's pointless to explain it all here."

Robert had a point.

"Understood."

I handed the staff back to him.

There would be time for a detailed explanation once we were back at the academy.

Recalling Robert's use of the staff in battle, I pondered deeply.

Had I been too rigid in my understanding of staffs?

They were not just devices to aid in casting magic but tools to assist the wizard themselves.

This realization became clear after observing Robert's combat style.

I smiled to myself.

"I'll need to completely redesign my staff when we return."

I was planning to overhaul my staff entirely – not just a mundane, conventional staff, but one uniquely mine.

"Let's go back,"

Robert called out and started walking towards the carriage.

As we walked,

"Rudy Astria. You'll be quite busy when we get back."

Astina approached me with a smile.

"Yes, there's a lot to do. Dealing with Astria family matters… and crafting a proper staff…"

"Hmm?"

Astina looked at me, her expression curious.

At her response, I tilted my head in confusion.

"Isn't that what you were referring to?"

"You… haven't seen your grades yet?"

"…What?"

Astina let out a sigh.

"First semester grades. They were released on the first day of the break. Didn't you check?"

"Ah."

Now that she mentioned it, I hadn't really checked my grades.

We left with Robert right as the break started… I hadn't had the time to look into it.

"But why would that make me busier?"

Astina smiled.

"You're the top student. You have to take over the duties that come with being the first in rank."

CHAPTER 168
HEAD (2)

On a dark night.

"I can help you."

Evan remembered what Jefrin had said.

"How exactly do you intend to help me…”

He was sitting in the dormitory, clutching his head in frustration.

Studying just didn't seem to click.

Even when he tried to train, a flood of distracting thoughts hindered him.

Evan had grown stronger.

He was now as strong as any student at the academy.

Yet, he was far from satisfied.

In fact, he found himself longing for his first year.

A time when he didn't compare himself to others, focusing solely on his own growth, on his pure efforts…

"How did it all come to this…”

Evan let out a deep sigh.

The next day.

"Ah…”

A woman stretched with a bright expression.

She was loosening up her body, moving around.

Although her demeanor seemed cold, her eyes held warmth as she gazed at the academy.

"Don't engage in intense exercise. Your wounds might get worse."

"Understood."

Responding to Cromwell's advice, the woman nodded.

The woman, Yeniel, with her silver hair fluttering, replied.

Cromwell, watching her, smiled and then spoke.

"Ah, and Principal McDowell wanted me to pass on a message."

"Yes?"

"He said to come and boast to him once you get good grades."

Hearing this, Yeniel fell silent.

McDowell had protected her, even when she was acting as a spy.

He had helped her, even to the point of losing his arm.

“…Please tell him I'll give it my best."

Determination was etched on Yeniel's face.

"Right, here's your dorm key. I've already unpacked your things, so you can use that room."

"Thank you."

After expressing her gratitude to Cromwell, Yeniel moved on.

In front of the dormitory, workers were busily moving around.

They carried furniture and various documents into the dorm.

Yeniel looked on, puzzled.

"Does someone actually bring such personal belongings to the dormitory?"

The dorm was already filled with fine furniture.

It was rare for someone to bring in their own personal furniture.

"Oh, that needs to go to the research lab."

As Yeniel observed the furniture, she noticed a girl organizing the area.

It was Yuni Von Ristonia.

Yeniel tilted her head at the unfamiliar face.

When Yeniel had left the academy, it was during her first year's second semester.

She didn't recognize the faces of her juniors.

Yeniel approached Yuni.

"Excuse me, what's all this?"

"Who are you?"

Yuni looked at Yeniel, confused.

"Bringing furniture… to the dormitory?"

"Yes, but why?"

"All of it?"

"No, some is going elsewhere. How could we possibly fit all this in the dorm?"

"Where's the rest going?"

“…To the second-year top student's research lab."

There were two types of cargo.

One was Yuni's belongings from the royal family, and the other was Rudy's for the research lab.

Yeniel's eyes widened at this information.

"The top student of the second year changed?"

"Yes, it changed last semester. But… who are you?"

Yuni eyed Yeniel suspiciously.

The change in the second year's top student was a well-known rumor throughout the academy.

It was suspicious that someone within the academy didn't know.

"Who's the new top student of the second year?"

“…It's a secret."

Yuni looked at Yeniel with suspicion.

Upon seeing the situation, Yeniel clenched her teeth.

Who was this child, and what had happened at the academy in her absence?

Until the second semester of the first year, Evan had been the top student.

'Could it be Rudy Astria?'

However, after observing the luggage nearby, she shook her head in doubt.

Yeniel was well aware of Rudy Astria's character.

'Rudy Astria suddenly bringing so much luggage to his own dormitory? And having this kid do it?'

Yeniel was under a misconception.

Most of the luggage actually belonged to Yuni.

Yuni had brought her own belongings because she wasn't satisfied with the dormitory's furniture.

In reality, Rudy's luggage consisted of only a few documents.

More precisely, these documents belonged to Professor Gracie's research lab.

Professor Gracie's lab was small, so it shared space with Rudy's top student research lab, and Yuni, a member of Gracie's lab, was merely moving them.

Yeniel had no way of knowing this.

'Who is this…! Some strange person has appeared while I was away… '

Yeniel's mind was racing.

She feared that something major had happened at the academy in her absence.

'I need to meet the others… What on earth has happened at the academy…!'

Yeniel frowned as she looked at Yuni.

Yuni, noticing Yeniel's stern gaze, frowned back, clearly displeased.

In Yeniel's mind, an image formed of an unknown character seizing control of the academy.

A scene with Rudy and Evan both defeated and fallen.

'Let's wait for a better opportunity… Now is not the time!'

Yeniel didn't say anything to Yuni.

She simply turned her head and walked toward the dormitory.

Yuni watched Yeniel's retreating figure.

"What kind of person is she?"

"Ah…"

Professor Gracie stretched leisurely in her chair.

"Nothing beats the life of a professor."

Recently, Gracie was enjoying a period of bliss.

Professor Robert was on vacation, Professor Mcguire had gone to the capital for a conference, and Professor Cromwell was preoccupied with his own tasks.

There was no one to bother Gracie.

Her only task was overseeing the staff research spearheaded by Rudy Astria.

This research was drawing to a close, so there wasn't much left for her to do.

Rudy had set everything up so well, and with so many talents around, Gracie's role was just to provide guidance.

Although Gracie had found the semester quite challenging, now she was more content than anyone.

With the vacation period, no students or professors around, her days were relaxed, spent enjoying coffee at the academy.

"Maybe I'll pick up some bread on my way home today."

Knock, knock—

As Gracie was savoring her happiness, there was a knock on her office door.

"Yes~,"

she said, smiling towards the door.

Rudy stood there.

"Hello."

"Rudy, you're here! Would you like some coffee?"

It had been a week since Rudy returned from the Railer territory.

Since then, they hadn’t seen much of each other due to his responsibilities with the handover of his top student role and student council work.

However, he had been diligently attending to his duties in the lab, so there was no reason for concern or complaint.

From Gracie's perspective, Rudy was like a goose that laid golden eggs.

Since Rudy became the top student, her lab had become a focal point for students.

Rudy had always been famous, but his association with Gracie's lab wasn’t widely known until he took up the top student role.

Rudy's research, especially in the challenging field of black magic and magical tools, had generated significant academic interest.

As a result, Gracie inadvertently received attention in the academic community and favorable reviews within the academy.

This only elevated Gracie's reputation.

More students expressed interest in becoming her teaching assistants, and the number of students interested in her classes increased.

Gracie couldn’t possibly dislike Rudy, the student who had boosted her reputation.

Rudy closed the door and entered the lab.

"No coffee, thank you. I've already had some. It's been a while, Professor. I should have visited the lab sooner."

Waving off his comment, Gracie said,

"Oh, I know you're busy. No problem at all. Did you just come to say hello?"

"No, Professor, I actually have something important to discuss with you."

"Is it something serious?"

"If you consider it serious, then yes, it is."

Gracie shrugged nonchalantly.

"Sure! Tell me anything! I'll do whatever I can to help!"

Professor Gracie, for the first time in a while, decided to demonstrate the generosity of a professor.

She confidently squared her shoulders, signaling her readiness to take on any task.

Rudy, watching her posture, gave an awkward smile and then carefully began to speak.

"That research we're currently working on…”

"Oh, the one about the staff? It's going well, isn't it? It seems like it will be completed soon?"

“…Yes, that one."

Rudy hesitated briefly, then spoke with a slight smile.

"I think we need to start it all over again."

“…What?"

Gracie's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Start over? But, we're almost done, aren't we? The magic circles are well-crafted, and they seem to be functioning. You want to redo all that?"

“…Yes, I believe we need to start over."

"Why? Why would we need to redo it? Haha…”

Gracie's eyes flickered nervously.

This research was eagerly awaited by the academic community.

It had been progressing for a semester and was showing promising results.

A presentation about this research was even scheduled for the end of the summer break.

"But we're not starting from scratch. We'll keep the magic circles we've already put in place."

"Then, what exactly are you changing?"

"We're planning to modify the exterior and add some functionalities."

The confidence in Gracie's eyes, who had initially declared she'd do anything, visibly diminished.

"Can't we just finish this research first and then conduct additional studies?"

"That's not possible. We need to use it for the joint practical in the second semester, so it must be prepared beforehand."

"But… the cost… and we hardly have any time left…”

"Oh, I heard there's an academic presentation scheduled for the end of the summer break. Is that correct?"

"Yes, there's an academic presentation…”

"Hmm…”

Rudy rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then lifted his head.

"It should fit perfectly with that timing."

“…Perfectly?"

"Yes, I've brought a research plan I developed with Luna."

"You made a research plan?"

Gracie hastily took the plan and her eyes widened in shock as she read it.

"You plan to complete this schedule? What about sleep? Aren't you going to rest?"

"Where's the time for rest? I'm considering cutting down on sleep to make time for studying and training."

"Ah…”

"Ah, and about the cost, I have research funds from becoming the top student, so I'll use that to cover it."

Gracie's expression turned gloomy.

If Rudy were doing this alone, she might not have been so concerned.

But her name was clearly listed in the plan.

If they were to proceed with this research, not only Rudy but also Gracie would have to spend all day at the academy.

"We'll have to pull all-nighters and live in a state of exhaustion, just like during the semester."

"Hey… it's vacation time… It's summer… I should be going to the beach with friends… having fun…”

"I've already had plenty of fun at Luna's estate."

"…"

"Then, we'll proceed as planned."

"Oh, no…"

When Gracie hesitated to hand over the research plan, Rudy looked at her with cold eyes.

Then he reached out and took the research plan.

"It's decided."

"Ah…"

Rudy then took the research plan from Gracie and walked out of the research lab.

"I'm counting on you."

CHAPTER 169
HEAD (3)

In the Astria Mansion, within the office.

Ian Astria was seated at his desk, immersed in his work.

Suddenly, a knock echoed through the office.

Knock, knock—

Setting aside the documents he was reviewing, Ian called out.

"Enter."

The butler bowed to Ian.

"What's the matter?"

"A guest has arrived, seeking an audience with the head of the family."

"The head of the family?"

Ian wasn't the head of the family at the moment.

He was performing the duties as the heir, but the true head was still his father.

Ian's brow furrowed.

"Who is this person who suddenly wants to meet my father?"

"I'm not certain. They brought the Astria family crest, so I allowed them in."

"The family crest?"

The Astria family crest wasn't given out lightly.

It was reserved for those whom the family was indebted to or of significant importance.

"Did they have any identification or anything else?"

"No, they didn't respond to my questions."

"Hmm…"

Possession of the family crest implied the individual was of importance to the Astria family.

Even without identification, the butler wouldn't have dared turn them away.

"Very well, let them in."

Upon Ian's instruction, a figure entered from behind the butler.

Enshrouded in a robe, their face concealed by a hood, the figure remained mysterious.

"I'll bring some tea."

Having shown in the guest, the butler bowed and exited the office.

"Please, have a seat here."

Ian gestured to the seating area in front of his desk.

"My father is currently at the Astria estate, so I am receiving guests in his stead."

Despite this explanation, the guest remained silent.

Ian looked intently at the guest before cutting to the chase.

"From where did you acquire our family's crest?"

"…Perrian. It was given by that person."

The guest's voice had a grating quality to it.

It was unpleasant to the ear.

Moreover, Ian bristled at the casual manner in which they referred to his father, the Duke of Astria.

Glaring at the person, Ian pressed on.

"So, what brings you here?"

"Hmm…"

The figure slightly lifted their hood to gaze at Ian.

Though the hood was raised, the person's face remained obscured, hidden behind a scarf.

Continuing to stare at Ian, the visitor finally spoke.

"I've lost information regarding Ephomos."

"…Ephomos?"

Ian's frown deepened.

He had never heard of Ephomos.

Ephomos had vanished when Ian was still a child.

Thus, he had never fully heard the tale.

"I don't understand what you're referring to."

"Hmm…"

The guest let out a sigh.

"Where might Perrian be?"

"Don't so casually use my father's name. More importantly, what are you talking about with Ephomos?"

The guest, still fixing Ian with a steady gaze, opened their mouth to speak.

"I am Daemon, a necromancer of the rebels."

“…What?"

Ian's eyes widened in disbelief.

This was the same name as one of the rebel leaders who had invaded the Liberion Academy.

"I am here due to a contract your father made with us. But since you seem unaware of its details, discussing it further appears pointless."

"My father… made a contract with the rebels?"

"No, the rebellion started after the contract with your father. Anyway, there's nothing more to say."

The figure stood up.

"If you don't want the Astria family to face ruin, you should inform your father quickly."

"What?"

Ian felt a surge of anger.

After speaking, the figure walked towards the door.

"Spatial Control."

As Daemon reached for the door, a barrier materialized in front of him.

Ian had blocked his way with space magic.

"So, a rebel dares to infiltrate the Astria family and thinks he can escape?"

“…Ha!"

Daemon laughed, as if amused by the absurdity.

Unperturbed, Ian focused his mana again.

"Capturing you half-dead will be a fine achievement for the Astria family."

"You can't even discern friend from foe."

"Spatial Slash."

As Ian chanted, the space horizontally split open, aiming precisely at the figure's legs.

Thud. The legs were cleanly severed, and the figure fell.

"Khehehe…"

However, no scream was heard.

No blood flowed from the legs.

Daemon opened his mouth, as if to mock Ian.

"Didn't expect me to be prepared for this, did you?"

Ian approached and removed his mask.

Revealed was a half-rotten face.

"An undead."

"Let's meet again later. Even if you don't know, your father will need us."

With those words, the figure collapsed, as if mana had been severed.

Ian stared intently at the body.

"Ian sir, I've brought the tea."

The butler's voice came from outside.

"Come in."

After entering with the tea, the butler looked down.

"What in the world…!"

His eyes widened at the sight of the body on the floor.

"How did this happen?"

"It doesn't matter. Clean it up."

"Understood."

"Oh, and one more thing."

Ian sighed and then spoke.

"I'll be visiting my father. Prepare for the journey."

"Rudy, here you are."

"Ah, thanks."

"Hehe, no problem."

I was in a research lab with Luna.

Coming to this lab with Luna brought back fresh memories.

I often used this lab at the beginning of my first year…

We were organizing our belongings in the lab.

It wasn't much, so the two of us managed just fine.

It's been about a week since we returned from the Railer territory.

I had started to slowly work on my staff project.

With Professor Mcguire currently away from the academy, Luna had also agreed to help me.

Astina and Rie seemed to be focusing on their magic studies these days.

Rie had been training her magic, perhaps troubled by what Robert said during our last encounter with the monster, and Astina was learning telekinetic magic from Cromwell.

Seeing them so focused made me worry if I was hindering Luna's studies.

Luna assured me that it was fine as she was studying diligently on her own.

Still, feeling a bit guilty, I planned not to rely on Luna's help in the latter part of the project.

I figured Luna's tasks could be handled by Professor Gracie.

With these thoughts, we were nearly done organizing the lab.

After finishing,

Luna and I sat down.

"So, what are we going to do now?"

Luna asked, tilting her head curiously.

"I have something in mind…"

I walked over to my bag and pulled out a piece of paper.

Then, I spread the paper out on the desk.

"…Eh?"

Luna looked at the paper, puzzled.

"This isn't a staff, is it?"

"It doesn't look like a staff, but its function is similar."

"Hmm… Can we really make it like this?"

"Professor Robert said it would be fine."

Luna stared at the paper with a perplexed expression.

"But… this is…"

She then picked up the paper.

"These are gloves."

"Right?"

The staff I intended to create…

It was actually in the shape of gloves.

To be exact, it was closer to a magical tool than a traditional staff.

After observing Robert's fight, I concluded that it didn't necessarily have to take the form of a staff.

I had three abilities I used in battle: dark magic, Priscilla, and martial arts.

Here, I pondered.

Which ability would benefit most from the support of a magical tool?

However, I didn't really have a choice in the matter.

Priscilla wouldn't become stronger with the use of a magical tool, as she grew stronger with more mana and mental strength.

Since dark magic could be supported with an ordinary staff, I considered how to enhance my martial arts.

That's why I chose gloves.

I thought they were the best form to augment martial arts.

"Hmm…"

Luna intently examined the gloves, then puckered her lips thoughtfully.

"Attaching the mana stones seems like it's going to be really tough…"

"Don't worry about that."

"Huh?"

I chuckled.

"That part has been taken care of by Professor Gracie."

After all, Gracie was known for taking things easy.

I acknowledge her hard work during the semester, but that's not an excuse for laxity.

Besides, such idleness wasn't really beneficial for Gracie either.

Engaging in research could lead to self-improvement, potentially increasing her salary, and bringing the joy of expanding knowledge.

All of this was actually for Gracie's own good.

Eventually, she would understand my intentions and appreciate them.

Luna looked at my contented expression and seemed sympathetic.

"Poor professor…"

"…"

With that, we commenced our research.

While Gracie was tasked with creating the main mana stone, we had to work on mana stones for auxiliary abilities.

Clunk.

As we delved into researching mana stones, the lab door opened.

"Oh, you seniors are really dedicated."

It was Yuni.

She was holding a beverage in her hand.

"Are you almost done with your work?"

"Yes, there wasn't much left to do."

Yuni distributed the drinks among us.

Luna, receiving her drink, smiled brightly.

"Thanks, Yuni! You're the best!"

Luna said while affectionately ruffling Yuni's hair.

Blushing, Yuni responded.

"No, it's nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? You're so adorable."

Luna hugged Yuni and nuzzled her cheek, finding her absolutely cute.

"Uh…"

Yuni appeared uncomfortable and unsure how to react, a situation we see seen quite often recently.

Ever since the rebel invasion incident, the relationship between Yuni and Rie had significantly improved.

Yuni would follow Rie around, showing a cheerful demeanor.

A while back,

Yuni brought various pieces of furniture from their royal home, which Rie found out.

Seeing this, Rie assigned Yuni a task.

The task Rie gave her was to socialize more with the people around her.

Though Yuni wasn't bad at interacting with others, there were occasional misunderstandings, mainly due to her upbringing as a princess.

Rie advised Yuni to minimize such incidents and try to gain the favor of those around her.

Since then, Yuni had been striving to behave like an ordinary student, actively trying to be liked by others.

She did things like buying drinks, as now, and was careful with her actions.

After hearing this, Luna began to praise Yuni generously, believing that encouragement was crucial in such matters.

"It's okay now! I have to report on my tasks too!"

Yuni squirmed out of Luna's embrace.

"Alright, alright~."

Luna released Yuni with a pleased smile.

"Uh… I'll give my report now."

"Okay."

Yuni handed me the documents she had brought.

The task I had assigned to Yuni was to secure a contract for mana stones.

We needed more mana stones in the lab, so it was necessary to make a separate contract.

For this, we utilized Yuni's status as a princess.

Originally, I had asked Rie to handle this, but according to her, Yuni needed this experience, so she delegated the task to Yuni.

"I managed to get medium mana stones for 4 gold each, and large mana stones for 10 gold each. I requested no more than 10 of the large mana stones."

"How about the payment?"

"We agreed to pay in cash. They will deliver the goods as they become available."

"Hmm…"

I smiled, satisfied with the outcome.

"Good work."

"It's just the basics…"

Yuni started to speak in her usual manner but then stopped herself and opened her mouth again.

"Th-thank you…"

"Uh…"

Luna, seeing this, smiled joyfully.

"You're so cute!!"

She hugged Yuni tightly.

"Aah!!"

Only after being thoroughly cuddled by Luna did Yuni later finally manage to escape her embrace.

CHAPTER 170
HEAD (4)

The hot sun blazed down, creating a stifling atmosphere.

Sweat soaked Robert's back.

He stood in front of a mansion, shielding his eyes from the sunlight with one hand.

This mansion belonged to Jason Ophillius, the Empire's Finance Minister.

A butler came out from the mansion and bowed to Robert.

"Please come in. They are waiting for you inside."

"Alright,"

Robert replied briefly and followed the butler inside.

The mansion, despite belonging to one of the Empire's two duke families, was surprisingly modest.

It was even smaller than some counts' houses and lacked any significant decorations.

The butler led Robert to an office.

As Robert opened the office door, he saw two men inside.

There was the stern-looking Jason Ophillius and McDowell.

"Are you Robert, the professor who sent me a letter?"

Robert nodded.

"Yes, but…”

He glanced at McDowell sitting beside him, his brow furrowing in surprise.

"Professor Robert, it's been a while,"

Greeted McDowell with a smile.

Robert noticed McDowell's missing right arm.

Ophillius chuckled upon seeing Robert.

"Ah, sorry about that. When I mentioned meeting Professor Robert, McDowell insisted on joining."

"Why is the principal here?"

"As you can see, I'm not in good health and have sought the minister's assistance,"

McDowell said, motioning to his missing arm.

"About that arm…"

"Ah, didn't Cromwell tell you? He must have kept it a secret from everyone. The man has no sense of flexibility,"

McDowell laughed heartily.

"Let's keep the pleasantries short. We can have such discussions after the main topic,"

Ophillius suggested, gesturing for Robert to sit.

Robert sat opposite them.

"So, you have something to say about the Astria family?"

"My mentors, Levian and Ephomos, and the Astria family,"

Upon hearing this, Ophillius's previously smiling face turned serious.

"You came to talk about their connection?"

"Where did you hear this story?"

"I've gathered it from various sources. While researching my mentors, I came across this information."

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"A few of my students,"

Robert replied.

"Which students?"

Ophillius asked, with McDowell smiling in response.

"Rudy Astria?"

Robert nodded.

"Aside from Rudy Astria, there's Princess Rie, the Persia family heir, and the daughter of the Railer Baron family."

"Hmm… The Railer Baron family? Where is that?"

Ophillius narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"The Railer Baron family resides in the western outskirts. Their house may not be prominent, but they have a student of exceptional ability and character, so there's no need for worry."

"If Professor Robert says so, then I believe it. Let's continue the discussion."

Robert nodded and pulled out several papers he had brought.

"These documents summarize the incidents caused by the Astria family."

Minister Ophillius scanned the papers.

"Is there any evidence?"

"Not yet. However, finding the necromancers and mana stones the Astria family is hiding will serve as evidence."

According to information gathered by Jack, the Astria family was still creating mana stones from humans.

It implied that the Astria family was still secretly harboring necromancers.

Uncovering the location of these wizards would end all this.

It could potentially bring down the Astria family itself.

However, they must not be completely destroyed.

The best solution would be for Rudy to inherit the family.

If Rudy took over, they could gain control of the noble faction under the Astria family.

Minister Ophillius finished reviewing the documents Robert had given him and looked up.

"So, what brings you to this old man?"

"Please help me. I'll find the evidence. Just use this information to pressure the Astria family."

Robert gazed intently at the minister as he spoke.

Minister Ophillius, seeing Robert's determination, smiled.

"I've become skeptical about making changes as I've aged, but I always welcome doing the right thing. I'm not sure how much help this old man can be, but I'll do my best."

At the Liberion Academy's training ground, a massive explosion echoed across the wide field.

Bang—

"This isn't it…”

Rie murmured.

Clutched in her hand was a staff, a gift from the royal family.

It was specially crafted for her, optimized for chain explosion magic—a commonly used spell, making its construction relatively swift.

But Rie was dissatisfied.

Although the staff increased her magical power and improved her skills, it still wasn't enough.

She had clearly seen the prowess of the rebels.

She had also witnessed Rudy's future abilities.

Her current skills didn't come close to matching theirs.

The gap in power was undeniable.

"What should I do…”

Rie pondered.

Her growth in magic was not slow; in fact, she was advancing at an astonishing pace.

But catching up to those who had already far surpassed her was challenging.

Slumping to the ground, she picked up a notebook and pen.

"Indeed… relying solely on chain explosion magic is insufficient…”

Despite her disheveled appearance as she sat and scribbled notes, Rie was undeterred, fully devoted to her magic.

Frowning, she brought the pen to her forehead, discontent with everything she had trained and researched so far.

"Even if I manage to get through the joint assessment between first and second years… what comes after is what worries me…”

The upcoming assessment after summer vacation was not her main concern.

She was preoccupied with the enemies that lay ahead.

Rie was in a dilemma.

'Magic, after all, is limited by the amount of mana one possesses… The maximum power one can unleash is predetermined… '

Lifting her head, she spoke a single word,

"Sylph."

Instantly, a gust of wind swirled, and a green-hued hawk materialized before her.

Rie's greatest strength lay in her ability to use elementals and magic simultaneously.

Until now, her focus had been predominantly on magic, but to surpass the limitations of magic, she realized the necessity of elemental assistance.

If she could synergize the two, she could display a power far greater than her current magical abilities.

"But, the problem is how to handle this…”

Rie had never delved deeply into the realm of elementals before.

Each individual had their limit in elemental affinity, and there was no known method to increase it.

Thus, the limit of her elemental abilities was already clear.

However, with magic, there were no such boundaries.

Her growth felt tangible as it was proportional to her efforts.

That's why she had focused more on magic.

Indeed, continuous growth in magic seemed right, but to become stronger immediately, seeking the help of elementals was necessary.

"But… to start studying elementals now…"

Rie pursed her lips and gazed thoughtfully at Sylph.

"Ah, right!"

While gazing at Sylph and contemplating elementals, something suddenly came to Rie's mind.

There had been a time when she intensely focused on elementals, even scouring through royal elemental masters' records and numerous papers for insights.

Rie hurried to her bag and pulled out her notebook.

Flipping through the pages, she found what she was looking for.

These were notes made when she had to seal Priscilla.

Months earlier, Rie had researched Priscilla at Rudy's request.

While Luna created a magic circle to seal Priscilla, Rie developed one to weaken the elemental's power.

However, due to an unexpected turn of events, the magic circle was rendered unnecessary.

Studying the notes, Rie sought answers within them, as she had never pondered over elementals as much as she did then.

Reading through the notebook, she found several intriguing points.

She immediately got up and headed to her room to find her research materials on elementals.

"Ah…"

After hours of revisiting her research, Rie found the answer she was looking for - the key to becoming stronger.

She leapt to her feet, invigorated by her discovery.

"If I do it this way…"

Gurgle—

"Ah…"

Her stomach growled, signaling that it was time to eat.

She glanced outside; it was already a dark night, and dinner time had long passed.

"…I should find something to eat."

Rie tidied her hair and stepped outside.

She preferred not to have maids around while conducting research, as they were more often a distraction than a help.

Thus, she began looking for a maid to prepare her meal.

"I'm hungry… and my eyes are sore…"

Exhaustion had built up in Rie's body.

Fatigue led to negative thoughts creeping in.

Though she felt she had roughly figured out how to use elementals, she doubted whether it would work effectively.

Lost in these thoughts while walking, she suddenly stopped.

"Huh?"

It was late, yet someone was approaching.

A familiar face.

"Rudy?"

"Where are you going at this late hour?"

Rudy approached Rie with a concerned look.

Rie's eyes widened, and then she smiled broadly before running towards him.

"Hey! What…”

She threw herself into Rudy's arms.

"What's this? Hey, why suddenly?"

Rudy was taken aback by her actions.

Rie, not paying any attention to his reaction, opened her mouth.

"I'm tired. Really exhausted."

"Ah, but why are you acting like this?"

Rudy looked around to see if anyone was watching and tried to gently separate from her.

"Ugh… just a moment longer!"

Even as Rudy tried to pull away, Rie held on tightly with all her strength.

"Haah…”

Hearing Rie's words, Rudy exhaled a sigh and gently patted her back in a resigned manner.

"Everything will be alright. Whatever it is…”

Rudy's words brought a smile to Rie's face.

She then relaxed her arms and stepped back.

"That's enough now."

"So, what was this all about?"

He looked concerned, as if wondering if something was wrong.

"No, it's okay now. I've resolved it."

Rie smiled satisfactorily, feeling reassured and energized by Rudy's comfort.

"I'll be busy for a while, so don't come looking for me. I can't focus when you're around because my heart flutters."

"No, but…"

As Rie spoke assertively, Rudy could only stutter in response, unable to find the right words.

"I'm going now."

Rie walked away with a smile, leaving Rudy behind.

"…What just happened?"

Rudy looked on, puzzled, as he watched Rie's retreating figure.

CHAPTER 171
HEAD (5)

Our research was progressing at a rapid pace.

I felt my health deteriorating, but I didn't pay much attention to it.

The benefits seemed to far outweigh the cost to my health.

We were only making magical tools, but I was learning a lot.

There were many challenges in trying to incorporate the properties of a staff into a glove and adding other abilities.

As I worked through these obstacles, my knowledge expanded, covering various magical knowledge to the specifics of magical tools.

This extensive magical knowledge grew over several weeks of research.

Gradually, the outline of our project began to take shape.

"Ughhh…"

Gracie, clearly exhausted, let out a strange sound and slumped over her desk.

I handed her a cup of coffee and chuckled.

"Don't push yourself too hard. Our academic presentation is just around the corner."

Gracie, looking wronged, got up.

"How can you say that! I'm doing my best! I hardly sleep and don't even drink!"

"Yes, yes. You're doing very well."

"Then let me rest a bit. Just for two days… or even just one…"

Gracie pleaded with a distressed face.

However, I firmly responded,

“No. Please continue as you have been.”

“Aaahhh… I’m the professor… why… why…”

Gracie moaned and slumped back over her desk.

This scenario had repeated so often that I had become somewhat accustomed to it.

I knew she would grumble for about ten minutes before getting back to work.

Ignoring Gracie’s sullen face, I looked at the clock.

“Luna is late…”

Luna was recently juggling work in our lab and in McGuire’s lab.

I was more worried about her than Gracie.

I had heard that the workload in McGuire’s lab increased after he returned from the conference.

Managing that along with our lab work was nothing short of superhuman.

“Hmm…”

After some thought, I came to a decision.

“It’s time to start using Kuhn…”

I had brought Kuhn into the student council at the beginning of the semester for this very reason.

Kuhn could use both alchemy and magic.

This ability was perfectly suited for magical tools.

Currently, as Kuhn was still a first-year and I had some spare time, I was assigning him tasks related to magical tools, but I planned to delegate more to him once I became a third-year.

His ability to use both alchemy and magic was perfect for magical tools.

I sometimes wondered if I was using the student council members too much for my own purposes, but it didn't seem to matter much.

I always ensured they were rewarded for their hard work.

Just then, the door to the lab opened.

"Haah… Haah… Rudy! Sorry! The professor had something for me to do!"

"Oh, Luna, you're here?"

Luna appeared to have rushed over, breathing heavily and with her hair in disarray.

"Luna, do you want to sit here for a moment?"

"Huh?"

Luna, looking bewildered, sat down in front of me.

Sitting face to face, I noticed the deep dark circles under her eyes, which only solidified my decision.

"Luna, I think it's better for you to focus more on your own work now."

"What?"

Luna looked at me in surprise, then waved her hands.

"No, no! I can do it. If I just reduce my sleep a little more…!"

"You should start preparing for your own work now. There's the combined first and second year assessment coming up, and you'll need some personal training for that."

"But, what about the work I've been doing…"

“Oh, can you hand that over to Kuhn?”

“Kuhn? Kuhn is going to join the research?”

“I haven’t told him yet, but I think he’ll agree.”

Hearing this, Luna’s expression fell.

“It’s not because you’re lacking. Without you, the research wouldn’t have progressed this far. I’m just worried about you.”

“Alright, I understand…”

Luna didn’t insist further.

She seemed to know that she was reaching her limits.

However, she appeared regretful that she couldn’t see the research through to the end.

“I’ll finish up the research. It’s pretty much done anyway.”

“Okay… Thank you.”

With that, Luna left the research lab, looking disheartened.

Luna left the research lab and sat down on a bench.

It was a rare moment of leisure for her, but her mood was far from cheerful.

She understood Rudy's decision.

Her physical condition was not normal; continuing the research could lead to her collapse.

Yet, she wanted to continue, desiring to be of help to Rudy.

“No… if I collapse, I’ll just be a burden to Rudy…”

She realized that her falling ill would only hinder him.

Rudy, by nature, couldn't focus on his work if someone around him was in trouble.

Luna was well aware of this.

“What can I do now?”

Luna pondered, gazing at the sky.

The approach of autumn was evident in the blue expanse above.

The end of summer vacation was coming.

“Once summer vacation ends…”

As Rudy had mentioned, the joint assessment for first and second years was soon.

Other challenges awaited her – battles to fight and more research to undertake.

“Then…”

Luna glanced at her bag, which contained her magical tome.

While the tome's powers were extraordinary, her ability to wield them was lacking.

She could use various abilities, but they lacked strength.

In a recent fight, she felt helpless, merely watching without being able to contribute.

‘For Rudy.’

This thought crossed her mind.

Working on Rudy’s gloves had sparked many ideas in her.

Researching the gloves had enhanced her understanding of Rudy’s abilities and revealed his weaknesses.

“Defense.”

Luna murmured softly.

It was Rudy’s most significant shortcoming.

Nodding in determination, she decided what skill she needed to develop.

As she was making this resolution, a yawn escaped her.

Tears welled up as she yawned widely.

“First… I need to sleep…”

With a small smile to herself, Luna walked back to her room.

In the principal's office of Liberion Academy, Cromwell sat reading documents at his desk.

He wore glasses and seemed deeply focused.

Though McDowell's health had somewhat improved, Cromwell was still performing the duties of acting principal.

Sifting through the papers, Cromwell sighed upon reading a particular document.

"Who should I assign this task to…?"

It was concerning the upcoming joint assessment for first and second-year students.

He contemplated handing it over to Gracie but then shook his head, dismissing the idea.

Although Gracie was capable and efficiently handled assigned tasks, her experience as a professor was still limited.

The joint assessment was an event of utmost importance at the academy, involving both first and second-year students, numerous teaching assistants, and professors.

It was a responsibility too great for Gracie.

The most obvious choices were Robert and Mcguire.

However, Robert had been extremely busy lately, often disappearing on some unknown business, making it impossible for Cromwell to ask.

"Maybe I should hand it over to Mcguire…”

Mcguire appeared busy too, but relatively more available than the others.

"Hmm…”

Cromwell pondered briefly before lazily scribbling Mcguire's name on the document.

"Mcguire has plenty of experience as a professor; he’ll handle it."

Knock, knock—

Just as he finished writing McGuire’s name, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in…”

Before he could finish his sentence, the door swung open.

"Cromwell, are you here?"

It was Mcguire.

Cromwell removed his glasses.

"Perfect timing. I was just handling some paperwork related to you."

"Related to me? What could that be?"

"Yes, it just came up."

"Again, dumping work on Robert and me?"

Cromwell, who was a perfectionist, couldn't stand seeing other professors handle tasks carelessly.

So during his tenure as acting principal, he had delegated most of the work to his trustworthy friends, Robert and Mcguire.

"But not this time."

Mcguire declared as he approached Cromwell’s desk and handed him a document.

"What's this?"

"My travel request."

"What?"

Cromwell's eyes widened in surprise.

"It seems my research at the recent conference was impressive. Looks like I'll be away on a trip until early next semester."

Cromwell read the document, an official letter from the conference.

"This seal…”

"Yes, it's been approved by His Majesty the Emperor. I wanted to decline, but if His Majesty calls, I have no choice."

Mcguire spoke with a sly smile, clearly not reluctant at all.

The research conference provided immense support, making life quite comfortable for the lead researchers.

Accompanied by elite royal wizards and virtually unlimited funding, the level of research conducted there was in a different league compared to what was done at the academy with teaching assistants.

Cromwell pressed his temples, clearly troubled.

Mcguire, noticing this, narrowed his eyes.

“…Were you about to assign me the joint assessment?”

Cromwell averted Mcguire's gaze.

“Hey! You were planning to dump that on a friend? Do you know how tough that assignment is?”

“Then who should I give it to? Robert seems busy too.”

Mcguire chuckled.

“You could do it yourself.”

“What? I did it last year. Besides, I’m not a professor anymore; I’m the vice principal.”

“If there’s no one else, you have to do it. That’s how it works,”

Mcguire teased.

“No, I can’t…”

“That sounds like a good idea to me.”

A voice came from the door.

Robert and McDowell were standing there.

“Principal? Are you feeling alright?”

Cromwell stood up abruptly, his eyes wide.

“I’m feeling quite well now. Time to get back to work, I suppose.”

McDowell smiled.

“Then let’s have Vice Principal Cromwell take on the joint assessment.”

“Me?”

Cromwell looked at McDowell in surprise.

“Ha ha, there’s no one more qualified than you at the academy. I’d like to ask this

favor of you."

"But… my duties as vice principal…"

"For the duration of the joint assessment, I'll handle the vice principal duties. You just focus on your research and the assessment."

Cromwell looked at McDowell, speechless.

"There's a lot of promising students in the first and second years. For a good assessment, it's best to have a skilled professor. Ha ha ha!"

"Well, that's true, but…"

McDowell, still smiling, clapped Cromwell on the shoulder.

"I'm counting on you."

Cromwell, usually rational and logical, couldn't refuse such a direct request from the principal.

"Alright… I will do it."

Robert and Mcguire burst into laughter at Cromwell's resigned acceptance.

CHAPTER 172
HEAD (6)

Summer vacation was gradually drawing to a close.

In a few days, school would reopen, and the research project was finally coming to an end.

Gracie left to prepare for an academic presentation, while Rudy and Kuhn remained in the lab to finish up.

"How did you manage to do all this?"

Kuhn exclaimed in astonishment.

Despite joining the research in its final stages, Kuhn's face was marked with fatigue.

He had stepped in on the day Luna had to leave the project.

Yet, there wasn't much left for him to do.

He had planned to take over Luna's tasks, but she had already completed everything, leaving nothing for him to do.

His role was limited to assisting Rudy and Gracie.

However, even this assistant role was not easy.

There was much to learn, and as a first-year student, he felt he was not up to par.

Nonetheless, he did his best to help Rudy.

As the research progressed, Kuhn couldn't help but be impressed.

There were nights they had to work through and times they barely had time to eat.

Yet, the hardships he endured seemed trivial.

Gracie and Rudy had put in far more effort than he had.

Kuhn was taken aback by their dedication.

It was almost unbelievable.

"Isn't it kind of fun? It's exhausting, but there's a sense of achievement too,"

"It seems to be more than just a bit tiring, though."

In truth, the research was largely completed by Gracie and Rudy.

Of course, Luna's contribution was significant as well.

Still, the success of the project was mainly due to the efforts of Rudy and Gracie.

Kuhn could only express his admiration for Rudy.

This was a different kind of respect than he had for Rudy as the student council president.

What level of ability did Rudy possess?

It was not just about talent.

Often, when faced with such hard work, one might desire to play or take a break.

But Rudy didn't.

He faced the hardships head-on.

If there was a deadlock or a challenge, he confronted it directly without compromise.

This was no easy task.

There were times he wanted to give up or avoid the situation.

Facing tasks head-on is painful.

Continuing to lead the work could be time-consuming and require an unknown amount of effort.

Yet, Rudy pressed forward.

All Kuhn could do was admire him.

He began to understand why the professors and seniors were interested in Rudy.

Rudy came over to Kuhn and patted him on the back.

"Well, it's all over now. You've worked hard too, Kuhn."

"Oh, no. It was all you and Professor Gracie."

"What do you mean? It's thanks to you, Yuni, Luna, and everyone else involved that we made it to the end."

Rudy said with a warm smile.

Talent, effort, character.

What does Rudy lack?

As Kuhn was deeply moved by Rudy's image…

'I should maintain a good image, so I can continue to make use of him… '

Rudy sighed internally.

Bringing in Kuhn was a good move, but honestly, he wasn't very useful.

What help could he expect from a first-year student?

Especially one who joined in the middle of the research, his usefulness was even less.

In fact, Rudy had more trouble teaching Kuhn various things.

Yet, Rudy managed a smile.

Having taught him this much, he planned to make use of Kuhn later.

"Let's just tidy up and then go rest."

"Understood."

Kuhn, touched, began to diligently clean up the lab.

As they were about to finish…

"Oh, you're still here."

Yuni had arrived at the lab.

"Yuni, did the presentation go well?"

"Yes, Professor Gracie was surprisingly good at presenting."

Yuni had gone to the academic presentation with Professor Gracie, having been part of the research since its early days.

"Uh… Ah…”

A strange noise came from behind Yuni.

It was Gracie, looking almost like an undead.

How she managed to present in that state was a mystery…

It was fortunate that the academic presentation was held at the academy.

Had it been in the capital or another city, Gracie might have collapsed.

Gracie entered the lab, looking exhausted but smiling with relief that it was over.

Yuni, after watching Gracie for a moment, clapped her hands as if struck by an idea.

"Ah, now that the presentation is over and school is about to start again…”

She smiled.

"Shall we have a party?"

"Professor Cromwell, won't you come along?"

"I'm buried in work… It's impossible to find even a moment."

"In that case…"

Astina, having heard from Rudy about the party in Gracie's lab, asked Professor Cromwell to at least make a brief appearance.

However, Cromwell shook his head, too busy with preparations for the upcoming joint assessment.

"Well, then I'll head off."

"Thanks for your help."

After receiving Cromwell's gratitude, Astina made her way to Gracie's lab.

"Do you have any idea how tough it was!"

"Riku! Slow down with your eating!"

"Mmmph!"

Even before she reached Gracie's lab, Astina could hear the bustling noise from inside.

She entered with a smirk.

Inside, many people were enjoying themselves.

Riku, Ena, and Luna were playfully eating, while Gracie, beside them, was drinking and causing mischief.

Kuhn and Emily were quietly enjoying snacks, and other students were present too.

"Oh, Astina, you're here?"

Rudy approached Astina with a greeting.

"Everyone seems to be having fun."

"Yes, with the start of the term right around the corner, we're making the most of the last days of the holiday."

As Rudy approached Astina, Rie also came closer, causing Astina to give her a sharp look.

"Sticking to him like glue, aren't you?"

Rie retorted to Astina's comment.

"What's it to you! It's natural after not seeing each other for a while!!"

"Ahaha…"

Rudy chuckled awkwardly at the exchange between Rie and Astina.

"Professor Cromwell isn't coming?"

"He's busy with the joint assessment preparations."

"By the way, I heard you've been helping with the preparations too, Astina…"

"It's not exactly helping. More like learning magic and just lending a hand."

As Rudy and Astina talked, Rie's eyes narrowed.

She then pulled Rudy's arm towards her.

"Come here."

"Eh?"

As Rie led Rudy away, Astina laughed.

"So, you think you're at a disadvantage when playing fair?"

"What… What?"

Stunned by Astina's provocative tone, Rie's eyes widened.

"If not that, then why are you taking Rudy away?"

"Eek…”

Rie, stopping in her tracks, stepped forward to confront Astina, their eyes meeting in a charged standoff.

In the midst of Astina and Rie's tense exchange…

"Rudy~"

"Huh?"

Someone quickly ran up and clung to Rudy's back.

"Hehe… nice…”

Luna's speech was slurred.

Startled, Rudy turned around to find Luna hugging his back and nuzzling her face against him.

Her face was adorably flushed.

"Luna?"

"What, what!"

"Hmm?"

The trio was surprised by Luna's behavior.

It was unusual for Luna to embrace Rudy in such a crowded place.

She wasn't one for such spontaneous actions.

Sensing something wrong, Rudy gently pushed Luna's shoulders back, creating some space between them.

"Uh… Rudy…”

Luna, with half-lidded eyes, reached out, trying to embrace Rudy again.

When Rudy leaned down to her level, he could slightly smell alcohol.

"Luna, have you been drinking?"

"Hehe… just a bit?"

Luna replied with a goofy smile.

Rudy quickly turned to look at Gracie, the only one drinking there.

Gracie was in a mess, encouraging the students to drink in her slurred speech.

"Drink, drink! It's not like you can drink outside of here!"

But it seemed Luna was the only one affected.

"Ahaha… Professor, maybe you should go in…”

Ena was doing her best to restrain Professor Gracie, probably to prevent further incidents after seeing Luna's drunken state.

As Rudy moved to intervene,

"Rudy~"

Luna attempted to hug Rudy again.

"Luna!"

"Stop her…”

Rie and Astina quickly grabbed Luna.

Rudy sighed, watching the scene unfold.

Some time passed, and the party came to an end.

Astina, due to the overly noisy and chaotic scene, decided not to clean up immediately and sent everyone to their rooms.

Luna was taken to her room by Ena and Riku, while Astina herself took care of Gracie, putting her in her room.

Astina briefly left Gracie in the professor's dormitory and returned to the lab.

"Ended up taking care of everyone instead of enjoying the food."

Astina sighed, regretting not being able to enjoy the party from the start.

"It's my fault for arriving late…"

She smacked her lips in disappointment and headed back to the lab.

"Better clean up now to spare the kids the trouble tomorrow."

Although Astina hadn't stayed long at the party, she intended to tidy up Gracie's lab for the sake of the others, knowing how hard Rudy, Rie, and Luna had been working lately.

Astina was reminded of her own second year, when she had worked tirelessly.

Even after meeting Rudy, she had devoted herself to her studies in magic, academics, and student council duties.

She was aware of their pain and effort, more than anyone else.

With a faint smile, Astina opened the door to the lab.

"Hmm?"

Upon entering, she saw Rudy sitting in a chair, actually dozing off.

Astina had told him to go back to his room.

"Haah… I told you to just go back."

Despite sighing, a smile formed on her lips, noticing a broom and towels next to him.

It seemed he had tried to clean but was too exhausted and fell asleep.

Astina could easily guess what had happened.

"You must be tired from all the research. And to think you even tried to clean up."

She quietly approached Rudy, crouching down to his level.

He looked peacefully asleep, like a child.

"Pfft."

Amused by this unusual sight of Rudy, Astina chuckled softly.

he playfully poked his cheek with her finger.

"I hope everything works out well."

Her words were for herself as much as for Rudy's future.

"I'll do my best, so you do your best too."

Astina said, smiling.

CHAPTER 173
HEAD (7)

It was early morning, and the students were bustling about.

Some were visibly tired, while others chatted excitedly with friends they hadn't seen in a while.

It was the morning of the school's opening ceremony.

Summer had passed, and autumn's arrival painted the surrounding trees with rich hues of fall foliage.

The blue sky seemed higher than ever.

Among the busy students, one man stood out with a dark aura.

It was Evan.

His mood was notably gloomier than anyone else's, not a typical demeanor for a student.

Dark circles under his eyes and tightly shut lips added to his forbidding presence, making him seem unapproachable.

"There he is…”

"Ah… the former top student…”

The students whispered and cautiously avoided Evan.

He was used to such murmurs.

Since his admission, he had faced criticism for being a commoner who achieved the top rank.

Despite various slanders against his character, Evan remained stoic.

But now, his anger was hard to contain.

Evan had always been the top student, a position that had been a pillar of strength for him.

But now, that pillar had crumbled.

He was no longer the top student, but the second.

Though still a high rank, it felt like a weak support for Evan.

With a clenched fist, Evan walked forward, the whispers of those around him piercing his heart like daggers.

What might have been insignificant words to others were painful to Evan, who was already hurting.

'What did I do wrong……. I was just trying to live a normal life……. '

As he walked, Evan noticed a silver-haired woman moving cautiously, hiding against a wall and scanning her surroundings.

"Yeniel?"

He was surprised, almost in disbelief.

"Ah! Evan!"

"Yeniel… where have you been all this time?"

Yeniel had been the only other support for Evan besides his rank.

She had disappeared without a word for months, and he had waited for her, hoping for some contact.

Despite searching for rumors or any news of her, Evan found nothing.

It was as if she had never existed.

But now, here she was, in front of Evan, as if nothing had happened.

Yeniel approached Evan, who was standing there dazed, with a smile.

"Evan, it's been a while."

"Yeniel, what happened? Where have you been all this time?"

"Ah… I had some… matters to attend to."

Yeniel said with an awkward smile.

"Matters? You mean with the Rebels…?"

Before Evan could finish saying 'Rebels,' Yeniel quickly moved to cover his mouth.

"Shh. You know you shouldn't talk about that so carelessly."

"Oh… Sorry."

"It was just some minor stuff. Nothing serious."

Yeniel smiled as if it was nothing.

Evan felt a bit uneasy.

"So, are you back for good now?"

"Looks like it. Unless something comes up, I plan to stay."

"That's good to hear…"

Evan let out a sigh of relief, glad that Yeniel wouldn't disappear again.

Yeniel, seeing Evan's reaction, looked slightly puzzled before clapping her hands.

"Oh, right. There's something I want to ask."

"What do you want to ask?"

"Who is the top student now? I heard you lost your position."

"Oh."

Hearing Yeniel's words, Evan's heart sank.

The comfort he felt upon seeing Yeniel was replaced with turmoil.

"Why do you ask?"

Yeniel stared intently at Evan, her eyes filled with suspicion.

But that look disappeared as quickly as it had come.

"Just curious, you know? I've been away from the academy for a while, so I'm wondering what's changed."

Yeniel said with an effortless smile.

'That look in her eyes just now…?'

Evan was slightly puzzled by Yeniel's expression but dismissed it, thinking he might have seen it wrong.

"So, who is the top student now?"

With Yeniel's gentle tone, Evan cautiously spoke.

"Rudy… Astria."

"Rudy Astria?"

Yeniel furrowed her brows and fell into thought.

Seeing Yeniel like this, Evan felt a surge of anxiety.

If Yeniel disappeared too, he would have nothing left.

He couldn't let this continue.

He had to… regain his top position.

That's the only way…

Evan bit his lip.

"Yeniel?"

"Hmm?"

Yeniel, lost in thought, looked up at Evan's call.

"I've been investigating something recently."

"Investigating something?"

Yeniel tilted her head, puzzled by Evan's abrupt statement.

"If you promise not to tell anyone, I'll share it with you."

Evan said with a kind smile.

Yeniel stared at Evan for a moment before mirroring his expression.

"Of course. What are you investigating?"

Evan looked around cautiously and then leaned in closer to Yeniel, whispering.

"Can you tell me about the Rebels?"

I found myself in an incredibly awkward situation.

"Let's get straight to the point."

Yuni's eyes were sharp as she glared at me.

Lately, she had become more sociable and her expressions softer, but right now, she was sharper than when I first met her.

Swallowing hard, I opened my mouth to speak.

"Alright."

Thump—

Yuni slammed her hand on the desk in front of me.

"What's your relationship with my sister?"

“…Yuni."

I looked at her with a troubled expression.

"Let's discuss this in the student council room or a lab, not here…”

We were in a second-year liberal arts classroom.

Everyone around us was staring intently.

It was no surprise that a first-year student raising her voice in a second-year classroom would draw attention, especially since I was the student council president and had just become the top student, talking about the Empire's first princess with the second princess…

I dreaded the kind of rumors that might spread.

"So, what is your relationship?"

"Haah…”

Yuni's discovery of my relationship with Rie dated back to a party before the school year.

I considered myself lucky it took this long for her to find out.

Rie's blatant actions had been numerous.

"Did everyone have a good break?"

The liberal arts professor entered the classroom.

He was puzzled to see the students looking elsewhere instead of at him.

"Students…?"

At the professor's words, Yuni turned her head.

"Oh, isn't that Yuni, a first-year student?"

"Yes, that's right."

Yuni responded with a nonchalant expression.

"We're about to start class. Shouldn't you be in your classroom?"

The professor tried to kindly suggest her departure.

Yuni, however, ignored his hint, looked around, and sat down near me.

"I'll audit the class."

The professor was baffled by Yuni's declaration.

"Isn't there a class for first-years now?"

"No, there isn't."

Of course, there was.

A first-period class on the first day of school for first-years.

Yuni brazenly gestured for the professor to proceed with the class.

"Ahem… Alright, let's begin the lesson."

The professor started the class.

Yuni didn't listen to a word he said, just kept glaring at me.

I was so distracted by her stare that I couldn't focus on the lesson.

Luckily, it was the first class, so not much progress was made.

After the class ended, I quickly packed my things.

And before Yuni could approach me…

"Whew…!"

Thud!

I started running.

How could I possibly explain things to her?

Running away seemed like the only option.

"Hey, hey!"

As I dashed out of the classroom, Yuni looked on in surprise.

"Senior!!!!!"

Yuni reacted faster than I expected and started chasing after me.

After a long chase, I finally managed to shake her off.

I thought she would give up after a bit of running, but she was surprisingly persistent.

"Haah… Haah…”

I hid in a corner of the academy and slowly caught my breath.

It seemed my stamina had dropped significantly since I hadn't been training lately.

"She shouldn't be following me anymore…”

"Who says I'm not following?"

"What the—!"

Startled by the voice beside me, I jumped.

There was Yeniel, squatting next to me.

"Yeniel?"

It was a welcome sight.

Rather than being surprised, I was relieved to see her.

I had heard she was severely injured by the Rebels and thought she might not be able to attend classes anymore.

Seeing her here, it probably wasn't as bad as I feared.

However, her expression was not very pleasant.

"Hmm…"

She looked at me with a furrowed brow and a suspicious gaze.

I opened my mouth, puzzled.

"It's you, Yeniel, right?"

"Yeah, can't you see?"

Yeniel responded with a prickly tone.

I was happy to see her, but I wondered why she was acting this way.

"Who's that girl you're hiding from? What's going on?"

"Ah… It's a complicated situation…"

I smiled awkwardly.

"Never mind that. I just have something to tell you."

"Something to tell me?"

As I looked at her quizzically, Yeniel spoke up.

"Evan is trying to make contact with The Rebels."

CHAPTER 174
HEAD (8)

Upon hearing Yeniel's words, a single question came to mind.

"Why?"

Why is Evan seeking to meet with the Rebels?

No matter how much I thought about the connection between Evan and the Rebels, nothing came to mind.

For what reason is Evan searching for the Rebels?

Usually, there's some intention behind wanting to meet someone.

I couldn't understand his intentions.

When I expressed my doubts, Yeniel sighed.

"Do you remember what I said before?"

"What you said?"

"Before I went to the Rebels, I had mentioned something."

I distinctly remembered Yeniel talking with Astina before she left for the Rebels.

Among the conversations they had about Evan…

"Was it about Evan acting strangely?"

"Yes, I've had an uneasy feeling since then. Now, it seems to have worsened."

"Hmm…"

Lately, I hadn't paid much attention to Evan's state.

Maybe I never did.

In my mind, Evan was almost like a hero who could do anything.

The Evan I saw in the game faced all dangers around him and accomplished whatever needed to be done.

He endured bone-crushing efforts to protect those around him.

When I was at my lowest, the memory of such a comforting Evan was vivid in my mind.

Thus, when I first arrived here, my sole focus was on survival.

Thinking or worrying about Evan seemed like a luxury.

I was too preoccupied with my own survival to spare thought for someone with heroic qualities.

However, my thoughts changed after the last Rebel attack incident.

The story I heard from Haruna.

The world I saw was just an illusion shown by Beatrice.

Those events hadn't actually happened.

They were possible, but not a certain future.

The Evan here was just a normal adolescent boy.

Just a regular student who was also the top of his class.

It seemed contradictory to be 'ordinary' and 'top of the class,' but he was both.

So, I regarded Evan as a slightly more talented student.

I wasn't disappointed anymore, even if Evan didn't show the qualities I knew from

the game.

After all, he was just a normal student.

But this strangeness was a different matter.

I only knew the heroic Evan, not the ordinary human Evan.

I didn't know what he wanted or how he would grow as a regular person.

The clear thing was that my presence wasn't completely unrelated to his change.

My actions had definitely influenced him in some way.

I sighed and opened my mouth.

"Do you know why Evan ended up like this?"

"I don't know for sure. I haven't always been around him. I only know what I've been told."

At Yeniel's words, I smiled.

"Thanks, really."

"Hmm…"

Yeniel tilted her head, looking puzzled.

She had been staring at me with a strange look for a while now.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Nothing's changed, yet…"

Yeniel muttered softly.

I wondered what she meant by that.

After staring intently at me for a moment, Yeniel finally turned her head away.

"Anyway, I'll make sure Evan doesn't meet with the Rebels. See you later."

"Ah, about that."

"Hmm?"

"Just leave it be."

“…What?"

Yeniel furrowed her brow.

"I've come up with a pretty good plan."

I said, smiling.

"Is this enough?"

Cromwell surveyed the papers he had plastered all around his room.

They were plans for the joint assessment of the first and second years.

He had pondered deeply over this particular joint assessment.

How should it be structured to provide the students with a valuable experience and earn favorable evaluations?

After much contemplation, Cromwell arrived at a conclusion.

The traditional practice of forming teams did not allow for an accurate assessment of each student's individual abilities.

In a team of three, there's always a chance that someone might just ride on the coattails of others.

It was an insufficient method to evaluate each student's individual prowess.

Therefore, Cromwell decided to make this evaluation an individual event.

But that wasn’t all.

While previously the students in teams would compete against each other, this time he created an opportunity for cooperation.

He considered sociability as part of a person's competence.

One might argue that forming teams for evaluation was a valid approach.

However, the sociability that comes with pre-formed teams could be a matter of luck or various other reasons.

True cooperation skills would be assessed only after the evaluation began.

It was about quickly befriending and collaborating with those around you once the evaluation kicked off.

"This should work fine."

Cromwell thought, putting down his pen.

He had finished preparing the evaluation earlier than expected.

The individual skills assessment and midterms weren't ready yet.

Since the joint assessment would only proceed after these, he had indeed finished quite early.

Cromwell smiled contentedly at his completed work.

Recently, the vice-principal's duties were being managed by Principal McDowell.

It was a promise made when he was assigned the joint assessment.

Thus, Cromwell had become a job-holding unemployed person, free as a bird.

Though still a professor, he was now enjoying a life even more leisurely than that of a retiree.

"Maybe I should enjoy some drinks today."

Just as Cromwell was indulging in these pleasant thoughts, there came a knock.

Tap tap—

A knock sounded at Cromwell's door.

"It's Rudy Astria. May I come in?"

Cromwell raised his eyebrows.

He had a bad feeling.

Whenever this guy was involved, things tended to go awry.

And it wasn’t just Cromwell who thought this way.

Gracie, Robert, McGuire—all the professors Cromwell was close to shared the same sentiment.

To the professors, Rudy Astria was like a bomb that unpredictably triggered numerous incidents.

"Come in,"

Cromwell said.

Rudy opened the door and entered.

"Professor, it's been a while."

"Cough… Yes, it has. Since winter break, right? I heard you became the top student. Congratulations."

"Ah, thank you."

Cromwell scrutinized Rudy Astria's expression.

His expression was unchanging, impassive.

The way Rudy entered didn't suggest urgency.

Cromwell felt a bit relieved.

Just knowing it wasn't an emergency was satisfying enough.

"So, what brings you here?"

Cromwell asked.

At Cromwell's question, Rudy smiled.

"It's about the Rebels."

“…What?"

Thud—

Cromwell abruptly stood up from his seat.

Of all times, why now?…

Just when he thought he could relax, the mention of the Rebels made his heart sink.

They were the most troublesome and problematic group lately.

To think Rudy would bring up such a headache-inducing matter.

Rudy seemed slightly taken aback by Cromwell's intense reaction.

"Oh, it's not that the Rebels have attacked us right now. It's just something related."

"Haah… And what would that be?"

He couldn't leave the students or others in danger.

Having heard such a story, as a vice-principal, he had to take action.

No matter how troublesome, it wasn't something to weigh against people's lives.

"Do you know Evan, the former top student of the second year?"

"Evan, you say."

Cromwell was well aware of him.

He had been paying attention to Evan since the last joint assessment of the first and second years.

He was interested in Evan's mana control technique and had been keeping an eye on him.

Evan's mana control had yielded incredible results since his first year.

The ability to slice through and nullify others' magic was something only Evan could do.

Even professors in related fields hadn't mastered such a skill.

Evan's other achievements were also quite remarkable.

His eco magic was developing differently from others.

Ecological magic, typically involving the growth of plants or using animals to cultivate the surroundings, was taken a step further by Evan, who could handle not only flora and fauna but also special elementals.

Special elementals were usually contracted using something other than elemental affinity.

However, Evan could handle them without a contract.

This was a new discovery for eco magic.

It shifted the idea that elementals, along with plants and animals, could also be part of ecology.

Despite such discoveries, Evan was always alone.

He severely lacked social skills.

McDowell had also mentioned something about him.

Evan was always in a gloomy state, never approaching anyone first.

He seemed like someone waiting for something… an odd fellow indeed.

Mulling over his thoughts about Evan, Cromwell spoke.

"What about him?"

"Has Evan ever been involved with the Rebels?"

Cromwell had heard many reports about the Rebels recently, but he had never heard Evan's name mentioned in relation to them.

"I'm hearing this for the first time."

"Hmm… According to what I've heard, it seems Evan has some connection with the Rebels."

"A connection? Are you suggesting he's joined the Rebels?"

"It doesn't seem to be that, but there are signs he's trying to make contact with them."

Cromwell stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"So, what are you suggesting? That we should monitor him?"

Rudy smiled.

"You always understand quickly."

"It's impossible within the Academy. Such actions are against the Academy's principles. However,"

There was still a way.

"We can keep an eye on any movement he makes towards the Rebels or attempts to communicate with them."

Rudy nodded, appearing satisfied.

"That would be enough."

"Alright… And,"

"Yes?"

Cromwell pressed his fingertips against his forehead.

"What else have you brought? Continue."

The matter concerning Evan was honestly trivial.

It was something that could be handled swiftly.

He wasn't already in contact or planning anything; it was merely a suspicion that warranted surveillance.

It was unlikely that someone like Rudy, a walking bombshell, would come only with such a minor issue.

Certainly, there was something more peculiar…

"There's another matter I'd like you to prepare for."

Cromwell's eyes widened.

Here it comes.

“…What is it?"

"When Evan tries to make contact with the Rebels."

Rudy lifted one corner of his mouth.

It was a sly smile.

"I'm thinking of using it as an opportunity to catch them."

CHAPTER 175
HEAD (9)

Yuni glared at the wall with a sulky expression.

Ever since she realized that the atmosphere between Rudy and Rie was unusual, she spent her free time brooding like this.

"Yuck… my sister…"

Jealousy, or something like it, was growing inside Yuni's heart.

Just when she had finally started to get along well with her sister, Rudy had come between them.

She wondered what he had done to cause this.

Rie, who was prickly with others and kept her distance, acted differently around Rudy.

She looked at Rudy with a dazed expression.

"Well… someone as remarkable as Rudy…"

Yuni had been around Rudy since her admission.

From the student council to the laboratory, they had spent time together.

That's why Yuni knew Rudy's capabilities well.

She understood why Rie might be drawn to Rudy.

"But, not now!"

If not now, she wouldn't be able to spend time freely with Rie.

Once Rie became a third-year, she would be away from the academy for a semester, and after graduation, both being princesses, they wouldn't be able to move around freely.

So, the only time Yuni could spend freely with Rie was now.

She didn't want to lose these moments to someone else.

Also, she wanted to see for herself if Rudy and Rie were a good match.

If she thought they didn't suit each other, she planned to prevent Rudy from getting any closer.

After much contemplation, Yuni lifted her head.

"Yes, I'll do what I can as a sister."

Yuni nodded firmly, humming an affirmative 'Hmm!'

The next day.

Yuni went straight to Rudy.

"Senior."

“…Gasp."

Rudy's eyes widened upon seeing Yuni.

He then immediately prepared to run.

Yuni quickly grabbed hold of Rudy.

"Senior! Don't run away, let's talk!"

"I don't think I have anything to say…”

"I do."

Yuni looked around.

"If you don't like crowded places, shall we go somewhere else to talk?"

"Proposing a bet?"

"Yes. Let's bet on something involving my sister."

I wondered what she was going to say, but her proposal was more absurd than I expected.

I stared at Yuni, who wore a confident expression.

"Why should I do that?"

"Are you not confident? Or is your affection for my sister not that strong?"

Yuni spoke arrogantly, as if trying to provoke me.

But it didn't feel like a real challenge.

"But Rie would hate something like that, wouldn’t she?"

Knowing Rie's personality, she would be annoyed if someone made a bet involving her, likely retorting, 'Who are you to use me for your bets?'

Yuni pondered for a moment and then furrowed her brows.

"Now that I think about it…”

It seemed Yuni had the same realization.

After a moment of contemplation, she looked at me.

"Then let's keep it a secret and still have the bet."

Her persistence was quite fitting.

I sighed.

What am I going to do with this princess…

"So, what's the bet exactly?"

I decided to hear Yuni out, at least.

After all, as long as I win the bet, it should be fine.

When I asked, Yuni pointed her finger at me.

"The joint assessment for first and second years! Let’s see who ranks higher. That’s our bet."

"The joint assessment?"

I couldn't believe it.

I had secured the top position in my class.

Compared to other students, I had more experience and was theoretically superior.

Being in the top of my year, I couldn't imagine competing with Yuni.

I smiled slyly.

"Do you really think you stand a chance against me?"

"We won’t know until we try. But,"

Yuni raised her index finger.

"If we directly compare ourselves, there's a high chance I'll lose. So, let’s base it on our year rankings."

"Year rankings…”

Yuni was currently second in our year.

The top position was held by Diark Verdès, a magic swordsman.

Despite studying both magic and swordsmanship, he proudly held the top spot in our year.

I had heard he was getting along well with Borval, though I hadn’t seen him in a while.

"Fine, let’s do that. But what happens if you lose or we tie?"

It would be unfair if only I stood to lose something.

Yuni looked puzzled, as if she hadn’t thought that far.

"I didn't think about that."

Yuni wasn’t known for thorough preparation in such matters.

In this regard, she was the complete opposite of Rie.

Or not.

Rie also acts impulsively sometimes…

Are they similar, then?

"Alright, so for when you lose, I get to set the condition?"

"Yes, sure."

"If you're proposing a bet, you should be prepared for the same conditions."

I looked at Yuni and smiled.

"If you lose, you'll stop approaching Rie."

Yuni's eyes widened as I laid out the condition.

"Me too?"

It was the condition she would fear the most.

Her proposing this bet was probably driven by her desire to monopolize Rie's attention.

I could see right through Yuni's intentions.

With such a condition, she'd likely back out without needing to follow through with the bet.

The loss would outweigh what she hoped to gain…

But Yuni's response was unexpected.

“…I'll do it."

"What?"

"I said I'll do it!"

I was taken aback.

"I'll decide for myself if you're suitable for my sister."

Yuni said this firmly, clenching her fists.

I found this interesting.

I had assumed she was driven by mere possessiveness over Rie, but it seemed she had other motives.

Given her determination, I was willing to compromise.

"Then we just need to agree on what happens if we tie."

"Yes, what should we do?"

After pondering for a moment, I spoke up.

"Let's call it even. If we tie, it'll be as if it never happened."

Yuni smiled, seemingly pleased.

"Sounds good. Let's do that."

After saying this, Yuni turned to leave.

"Train hard until the joint assessment."

"Sure, you too."

I waved at Yuni as she walked away.

"I guess I need to put in some effort too."

I had a prior commitment before meeting Yuni today.

It was an appointment to train for the joint assessment.

I had made gloves for the assessment, but their practicality hadn't been proven yet.

I only knew they were usable.

Therefore, an experience close to real combat was necessary.

There's a big difference between using something in practice and in actual combat.

A technique that works in practice might fail in combat.

It was important to identify such details.

For that, I needed a strong opponent who knew my weaknesses.

With these thoughts, I soon arrived at the training ground.

The training ground, located on the outskirts where few people came.

I chose this place not because I didn't want to reveal my abilities or attract attention, but to prevent bystanders from getting hurt.

As I entered the training ground, I heard a voice.

"Oh, you're here."

My opponent was none other than Astina.

She knew me well and was among the strongest people I knew, aside from the professors.

Lately, Astina had been enjoying her leisure time.

It seemed she had already completed her thesis for graduation and met all other requirements with room to spare.

Now, all she had to do was wait until graduation.

That's why I sought out Astina.

As I approached her, I started to speak.

"I apologize for being late. I was delayed by some work."

"It's fine. I know you're busy. I just came here early to train."

Lately, Astina had been practicing her magic alone.

With her free time, she was focused on enhancing her own abilities.

That's why I had asked for her help, knowing she was focused in her training.

For both Astina and me, sparring with each other was the fastest way to improve.

However, there was a problem.

Astina's abilities were particularly well-suited to counteracting mine, which was concerning.

My biggest weaknesses currently were defense and mobility.

The only way I could move quickly was by enhancing my legs.

And my defensive skills were almost nonexistent.

In contrast, Astina possessed abilities that were excellent for pushing opponents back and maintaining distance.

Her capabilities were just too challenging for me to face.

Although I had more than enough power to break through an opponent, I lacked the means to reach them.

At the very least, I needed to advance while defending or move at a speed that the opponent couldn't react to.

I hadn't met either of these conditions.

While such tactics might work against weaker opponents, I wasn't confident against stronger ones.

I hadn't yet had the chance to properly fight someone that strong.

In a way, this was a good opportunity.

It was a chance to find a way to penetrate the defenses of a strong opponent.

Astina looked at me and smiled.

"You have a lot on your plate with the student council and other responsibilities. Are you sure you can afford to train with me?"

"The lab work should be on hold for a while, and the student council work isn't that tough."

Astina shook her head at my response.

"That's not what I mean. If I take you on seriously, there's a chance you might get hurt. Wouldn't that hinder your other activities?"

"You don't need to worry about that. If I was afraid of getting hurt, I wouldn't have approached you. Just do your best against me."

"You seem quite confident."

"Would I say this if I wasn't?"

At my words, Astina's smile grew wider.

"Alright then, let's get started."

Astina threw off her outer garment and untied the ribbon around her neck.

"Please, do your best."

I put on the gloves I had brought and replied.

CHAPTER 176
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT 2 (1)

Time flew by, and autumn arrived.

Then, the day everyone had been eagerly awaiting approached.

It was the Individual Skills Assessment, held before the Joint Assessment.

At one of the academy's open spaces, the so-called highlight of the Individual Skills Assessment, the Destructive Power Test, was taking place.

In the center of the open space stood a person and a scarecrow.

It seemed the assessment had just been conducted, as dust clouds were rising around them.

The onlookers expressed their admiration upon witnessing the scene.

"Indeed… This year's first-year students are of a high caliber."

"It's a pleasure to the eyes. To see such an assessment from first-year students."

"This is comparable to the current second-year students…"

Such comments were heard all around.

Diark Verdès stood in the center.

Verdès, a scion of the Verdès family, a magic swordsman, and the top student, was the center of everyone's attention.

Diark lived up to the immense expectations placed on him.

In fact, he exceeded them.

Diark smiled satisfactorily.

'It was perfect.'

He seemed to have performed even better than he did usually in practice.

Diark, shining as the top student of the first year, demonstrated his skills brilliantly.

Moreover, the technique he used, a combination of sword aura and magic, was immensely destructive.

The ground around him was cratered from his technique, and the scarecrow in the center was tattered.

'Borval senior…! I did it!'

Diark mentally celebrated while looking around.

At the edge of the arena, Borval was smiling contentedly.

The ability Diark used was a technique inspired by Borval's ability, interpreted in the style of a magic swordsman.

Diark wanted to show Borval, who had helped him develop this technique, that he could be number one.

After a short wait, the announcer exclaimed loudly.

"7620 points!!! An overwhelming first place!!! A record high score."

'This should be enough… '

Diark checked the score of the second place.

Even with the highest score, the gap with the second place was crucial.

Currently, Kuhn was in second place.

Though Kuhn had just performed impressively in the assessment, he was no match for Diark.

Kuhn had scored in the 4000s.

The gap was nearly double.

However.

'The variable is… '

There was just one first-year student who possessed the ability to threaten Diark.

Yuni Von Ristonia.

The person who had outsmarted Diark in the student council president elections.

Recently, Diark had been enjoying watching Rudy tame Yuni, but he still had an unresolved grudge.

This was a debt Diark himself wanted to settle, not to be paid by someone else.

For now, Diark stepped out of the open space.

As soon as he left the open area, Diark Verdès ran towards Borval.

Borval, with no particular expression, was sitting, his large muscles taking up two seats, and his axe occupying another, effectively hogging three seats by himself.

Approaching Borval, Diark opened his mouth, a look of pride on his face.

"Senior, did you see that?"

Borval nodded.

"It seemed your abilities were stronger than usual today."

Diark smiled at Borval's remark.

"Indeed, did you notice? I felt in great condition today and decided to use a bigger technique."

Borval slightly furrowed his brow.

"You shouldn't use your abilities so recklessly. It's important to control them, using only as much as necessary. Remembering the exact amount of mana and the sense of how you usually use it is important in real combat."

"Ah…"

Diark nodded, seemingly moved by Borval's words.

"You're right, senior. I shouldn't use my abilities indiscriminately just because I'm in good condition."

Using too much mana when feeling strong could create vulnerabilities.

Mana could be depleted too quickly, or one might even use more mana than they could handle.

Hence, in real battles, it was crucial to use mana in accordance with one's usual pace.

As Diark looked dejected, Borval punched him lightly in the chest.

"Still, it was an impressive technique."

After saying this, Borval turned and walked away.

Diark, wide-eyed, bowed his head towards Borval's retreating figure.

"Thank you!"

As Borval walked away, he slightly raised his hand.

"Ha ha…"

Diark smiled, pleased with the high score he had received.

With such a score, even Yuni would find it difficult to win against him.

Smiling, Diark was about to enter the building when he saw Yuni Von Ristonia inside.

"Yuni Von Ristonia…"

Yuni's face was scrunched in a frown.

This frown was different from her usual expression.

When Yuni frowned, it usually conveyed annoyance or irritation, but this time, it was a look of unease.

'Did she watch my match?'

Diark thought Yuni might have felt daunted after seeing his performance.

'It's possible.'

The technique Diark had displayed was satisfactory even to himself.

It wasn't just practical but also flashy and powerful.

Diark, intending to mock Yuni, walked towards her.

"Yuni Von…"

Before he could finish, Yuni, without turning to look at him, suddenly ran off somewhere.

"…Huh?"

Diark looked puzzled.

He had planned to provoke her, but she ran off so abruptly that he couldn't bring himself to chase after her.

'Where is she going?'

Diark stared intently in the direction Yuni had run off to.

"…The restroom?"

The Individual Skills Assessment.

This activity, conducted before the Joint Assessment, tests the students annually in great detail.

Especially for the first-year students, as it's their first assessment, the examination is even more thorough.

The tests start with mana-related assessments and include various physical examinations.

These are designed to detect any unknown diseases early and provide treatment, thereby preventing the loss of talented individuals due to untreated ailments.

I looked at the long line of first-year students.

“There are so many…”

The line was not diminishing quickly.

Of course, some students left the line for the Destructive Power Test, the highlight of the individual assessment, but the line never really shortened.

“It looks like it’s going to take 2-3 hours just to get through one test…”

“Just relax. It’s a good time to rest.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I replied to Rie, who was standing behind me in line.

Rie and I were queuing for the same assessment.

Standing in line alone might have been boring, but having Rie there made it less so.

“By the way, are you well-prepared for the Joint Assessment?”

Rie tilted her head and asked.

“Kind of? I mean, I didn’t train specifically for the assessment. It was more like my usual training routine.”

“I heard you’ve been training hard with Astina lately.”

Rie narrowed her eyes.

“Just training, right?”

“…What else do you think I did?”

“If it’s true, then never mind.”

Rie spoke with a nonchalant expression.

What’s bothering her…?

Training is something anyone can do.

Lately, Rie seemed to have become more jealous.

“What have you been up to lately? I asked around but no one seems to know. You also haven't been around.”

“If you were curious, you should have come to see me.”

“You told me not to look for you.”

“Well, yes, but what if you really didn’t come? You should at least show your face occasionally. Don’t you know a girl’s heart?”

Rie stamped her feet behind me as she spoke.

“Alright… I’ll come to see you next time.”

Pleased, Rie smiled contentedly.

“That’s good. You’re so nice, Rudy.”

Rie tiptoed and patted my head.

People around us stared blatantly.

My face turned red with embarrassment, being so overtly affectionate in front of others.

How do couples manage to do this kind of thing?

“So, what kind of training have you been doing alone?”

I quickly changed the subject, fearing strange rumors might spread if we continued like this.

“Oh, I wasn’t training alone.”

“Hmm?”

“Serina helped me.”

I tilted my head in confusion.

“Serina came to the academy?”

“Yeah, she’s part of the Royal Secret Service. They can move freely if ordered. I asked if Serina could help me for a while.”

Serina had a history of causing trouble at the academy.

"Can she really just come and go as she pleases?"

"Don't worry, I've got permission for all of it. My lodging is outside the academy, and I only came in briefly from time to time."

Rie seemed to read my mind and answered my unspoken question.

"Alright, I trust you managed it well. So, did you focus on training Elemental Magic?"

"Um… Sort of?"

Rie replied noncommittally.

I looked at her intently.

"Didn't you train in Elemental Magic?"

"Well, yes, but it’s a bit complicated…”

"Complicated how?"

Rie chuckled and playfully patted my back.

"It wouldn't be fun if I just told you. You’ll see it later."

"Okay, got it."

There would be an opportunity to showcase our abilities in the open area anyway.

It was better to witness it directly than to probe further now.

As we were chatting, a loud announcement rang out.

"Student Yuni Von Ristonia, please come to the open area."

"Is it Yuni's turn?"

It was time for Yuni to display her abilities in the open area.

As I said this, Rie frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Hmm… I saw Yuni earlier… she didn't seem to be in good condition."

"Not in good condition?"

"She’s been acting strangely recently. Uncharacteristically intense about her studies… I'm worried."

Hearing this, I felt a pang of guilt.

I couldn’t bring myself to tell Rie about the bet I had made with Yuni, who had asked to keep it a secret.

There was no need to stir up trouble.

"Ahaha… It's good to be diligent. She's probably just trying to get good grades."

"That’s true, but… Yuni has a sort of trauma. It’s not good for her to be so tense…”

I tilted my head, confused.

"What do you mean?"

"Yuni isn’t usually the type to get nervous, but when she does, she tends to make mistakes…”

Although I initially worried about Yuni's trauma, Rie's explanation made it seem less concerning.

"Mistakes… Everyone makes mistakes when they're nervous."

"No… it's not just any mistake…”

"Hmm?"

Rie scratched her cheek awkwardly, her explanation unclear.

"Do you want to go watch if you're so concerned?"

"No, Yuni might get even more nervous if I go. I just hope she overcomes it on her own."

Rie gazed towards the open area, her expression growing darker.

CHAPTER 177
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT 2 (2)

It was when Yuni was very young.

Back then, Yuni, still a child, made a big mistake in front of many people.

She really needed to use the bathroom, but with so many people waiting, she had to forcefully hold it in.

And eventually… she made a mistake.

At that time, Yuni was so young that the people around her didn't make a big deal of it, but the incident left her traumatized.

Whenever she felt nervous, she needed to use the bathroom, and it was the same no matter how many times she went.

"Ugh…"

Yuni stood in line with a frown on her face.

She was waiting for a physical examination.

Even if she felt unwell, she had to get the examination done.

Sitting in the bathroom for a long time wouldn't change much, so she was trying to get the examination done.

But…

'I just went a moment ago… '

Yuni was squirming.

It hadn't even been an hour since she last went to the bathroom, but she felt the urge

to go again.

'No… it's not really that I need to go… '

Yuni repeated this to herself several times.

But that didn't make her body listen.

She just held on to her skirt, trying to endure.

"Hmm…? Yuni?"

At that moment, Luna approached Yuni.

"Oh… Luna."

"Yuni! Long time no see!"

Luna greeted Yuni with a bright face.

Then she stared intently at Yuni.

Yuni looked pale and was squirming.

Seeing this, Luna gasped.

"Um… Yuni."

Luna carefully approached Yuni and spoke.

"You can step out for a moment… They'll still do the examination even if you're a bit late."

Anyone could see that Yuni was uncomfortable.

Luna spoke quietly, considering Yuni's feelings, but Yuni shook her head.

"It's, it's not that… I'm just feeling a bit unwell…"

"Do you want me to take you to the infirmary?"

Yuni firmly replied to Luna's question.

"No, it's okay."

She was biting her lower lip.

"It's something I need to overcome."

Normally, Yuni didn't know what nervousness was.

With her nature of taking things lightly, there wasn't much that could make her nervous.

But this time was different.

She had to score well.

The score from the individual assessment would be reflected in the joint assessment.

Yuni wanted to do her best.

She didn't want to lose even a single point.

A mistake here could mean not being able to be with her sister, Rie, for one or two years.

A brief mistake could result in not being able to spend time with the sister she had just become close to.

Such pressure weighed heavily on Yuni.

Luna looked at Yuni with a worried expression.

Then, after a moment of contemplation, she spoke.

"Ah, this should do."

Luna removed her outer garment.

"Huh?"

Then, she bent over and tied her clothing around Yuni's waist.

"Keeping your stomach warm is important! Ah, if only I had a blanket or something…”

Luna clicked her tongue, seemingly dissatisfied with only being able to tie her clothes around Yuni.

Her face conveyed a desire to do more.

Yuni bowed her head in gratitude to Luna.

“…Thank you, Senior."

The fact that someone cared for her this much was deeply appreciated.

It was a warmth she hadn't felt before.

As Yuni bowed, Luna smiled warmly and gently stroked Yuni's head.

"It's natural for a senior to take care of a junior who is unwell!"

Luna's smile was comforting.

Just seeing it made Yuni feel reassured and warmed.

Luna stroked Yuni's head a few more times, then looked around.

Seeing no one nearby, she whispered to Yuni.

"Take care of yourself on those days. Keep warm. And here, take this."

Luna handed Yuni a small envelope.

It contained candy.

"Ena gave me this candy… it has pain-relieving effects. Eat this, it's grape-flavored so it should taste good!"

"Ah…”

Luna was slightly misunderstanding the situation.

She thought it was 'that time of the month' for girls.

Yuni quickly realized this misunderstanding.

"Ah, Senior… it's not that…"

"Luna! Come quickly!"

"Ah, okay! Yuni, do your best!! Good luck with your assessment!"

Before Yuni could clarify the misunderstanding, Luna was called away and quickly disappeared.

Yuni watched Luna leave, then looked down at her palm.

There was the candy Luna had given her.

It was a piece of candy, crumpled in paper.

Candy was a luxury item, difficult for commoners and lower nobility to afford.

As a royal, Yuni could have it anytime, but Luna probably couldn't.

Especially a medicinal candy like this was even more precious.

Yuni clenched the candy tightly in her fist.

'Luna took such care of me… I have to be strong too.'

Yuni clenched her teeth in determination.

Time passed.

"Yuni Von Ristonia, please come to the field and wait."

Having completed her examination and waited, it was now Yuni's turn.

She had to step out onto the field for her assessment.

Yuni started walking.

As she approached the field, the pressure intensified.

'I just went to the bathroom a moment ago… '

Yuni's legs trembled.

She gripped Luna's clothing tightly.

Her senior had given her so much support.

She had to be strong.

'Ugh… '

Yuni walked forward, her legs trembling.

As she continued, she finally reached the vicinity of the field.

The assessment coordinator approached.

"Yuni Von Ristonia… you have arrived."

"Ah, student Yuni has come…"

The coordinator turned towards Yuni upon hearing her voice and immediately looked concerned.

Yuni's face was beyond pale, turning almost blue, and she seemed unable to control her trembling body.

Her legs shook as if she were a newborn fawn.

"Yuni, are you unwell?"

The coordinator, startled by Yuni's appearance, approached her with concern.

"No… I'm alright."

"Your condition doesn't seem good… Maybe you should go to the infirmary…"

"No, really… I'm fine."

Despite Yuni's assurances, her condition did not seem to improve.

'It's nothing. Just do it. Like you always do… just follow the practice… '

Yuni bit her lower lip.

She just needed to endure it for a bit longer.

Just a little longer…

But gradually, the pressure in her lower abdomen intensified.

She began to feel not just the urge to use the bathroom, but actual pain.

Yet, she tried to move forward.

Yuni looked towards the field she was supposed to enter.

There were many people around the field.

All those people were looking towards the center of the field.

The place where Yuni needed to be.

"Ah…"

She could feel their gazes.

Some were filled with anticipation, but among them, there were cold, judgmental stares.

Yuni only noticed the cold eyes, which triggered her trauma even more.

Usually, Yuni didn't care about her surroundings to avoid such feelings.

Paying attention to others made her body tense and triggered her past traumas.

When she didn't think about anything, her mind was at ease.

This was Yuni's way of surviving.

Ignoring those around her and maintaining her own pace.

But now, that was impossible.

She could see the eyes of the people outside, and inside, the bet she made with Rudy was pressuring her.

The tension wrapped around her body.

Yuni grimaced and bent over.

Her head started spinning.

The world seemed to shake, and everything around her blurred.

It was more than just wanting to use the bathroom; she was being pushed to a mental corner.

"Yuni! Student Yuni!"

The coordinator tried to support Yuni.

As they reached out to grab her, Yuni brushed their hand away.

"You look really unwell…"

"I'm fine… really, I'm okay…"

Yuni held her abdomen as she spoke.

If she missed her turn, she would receive a deduction in her score.

Even if it was a health issue, she would have to take the assessment with a deduction.

But the pain in her abdomen was growing.

Yuni grimaced with pain and then a thought crossed her mind.

"Ahh… that's right. The candy Luna gave me…”

Yuni reached into her pocket.

The candy Luna had given her earlier was now in her hand.

'It has pain-relieving effects… '

With her abdomen aching, she hoped the candy would provide some relief.

She unwrapped the paper around the candy and popped it into her mouth.

The sweet taste spread through her mouth.

However, there was no significant change.

Her abdomen continued to ache, and her legs trembled.

"Next student, please!"

Then the announcer's voice was heard.

The turn of the student in front of Yuni had ended.

It was now Yuni's turn to enter.

"First year student and the second princess of the empire! Yuni Von Ristonia!"

Upon hearing the announcer, Yuni lifted her bowed upper body.

Despite her pain and poor condition, she had to proceed with the assessment.

She couldn't run away.

But her legs were frozen.

She wanted to walk forward but couldn't move.

The gazes from outside were terrifying.

Her trembling legs wouldn't obey her commands.

"Why can't I…”

Yuni made a sad face and looked down at her legs.

Then she muttered to herself.

"You can do this… Yuni Von Ristonia…”

Yuni hit her legs with her fist.

It wasn't a strong punch.

Rather, it was a feeble attempt, lacking strength.

Even after hitting her legs a few times, they wouldn't move.

Yuni spoke in a desperate voice.

"You can do this…”

Thump—

She felt a touch on her head.

"Yes, you can do it."

A voice was heard.

Yuni turned around.

There stood Rudy.

CHAPTER 178
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT 2 (3)

"I wonder if she's okay."

I was walking quickly.

Having heard Rie's words, I couldn't just ignore them.

It was Yuni who had suggested the bet, but I too had a responsibility since I had accepted it.

I didn't want to see Yuni fall apart.

The best Yuni was just being Yuni.

"If that's the case, why didn't you tell me sooner…”

Had I known, I wouldn't have agreed to the bet.

There was no need to overcome any pain right now, no matter what it was.

It was important for Yuni to maintain her condition, as her performance would directly affect her grades.

Feeling guilty for putting her in the worst condition in such a situation was inevitable.

"Now, the next student, please!"

The announcer's voice rang out, and I arrived at the corridor where Yuni was.

I saw Yuni up ahead, trembling.

It was an unfamiliar sight.

Yuni was usually a strong-hearted and indifferent person.

Seeing such a person trembling made me sigh.

It seemed like my fault somehow…

"First year student and the second princess of the empire! Yuni Von Ristonia!"

It was Yuni's turn to go out.

She was supposed to walk down the corridor as per the proceedings, but she couldn't move forward.

Her legs weren't moving, as she tapped them with her fists.

Though she wasn't saying anything, I could almost hear her shouting at her legs to move.

I slowly approached Yuni.

"You can do this… Yuni Von Ristonia… You can do this…"

She was muttering to herself in a trembling voice.

I placed my hand on her head.

"Yes, you can do it."

"…?"

Yuni turned around with a puzzled look.

Her eyes were glistening.

It seemed like she was on the verge of crying.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ru, Rudy?"

Surprise was evident on Yuni's face.

I raised both my hands.

I gently grasped Yuni's cheeks.

I pulled her cheeks recklessly.

"Huh??? What are you doing…”

"You're clumsy."

Yuni's eyes widened as I spoke firmly.

"What?"

Yuni flared up while I still held her cheeks.

Ignoring her reaction, I continued.

"But that's only when compared to second years like Rie and me."

I pointed outside.

"Compared to those outside, you are extraordinary."

"That's…”

"You're a princess. Of high status. You are incomparable. Plus, you're ranked second in the first year. You achieved that while helping out in Gracie's lab."

"No, what are you suddenly talking about?"

I patted Yuni's back hard.

And I laughed.

"Don't be nervous."

"Yuni student! Please come out!"

The announcer called out.

"Hey, they're calling you. Hurry up."

"Uh, wait! Senior!"

"Save what you want to say for after."

As I pushed her back as if to hurry her, Yuni walked out with a puzzled look.

"Why did he suddenly come here?"

Yuni touched her still-tingling cheek, utterly bewildered.

It was strange for someone, her opponent at that, to show up just to recite her strengths.

His actions left her puzzled.

After spouting some odd remarks, pinching her cheeks, and then pushing her out, she felt completely disoriented.

"Hmm?"

However, her tension eased a bit.

She wasn't in perfect condition, but there was definitely an improvement.

‘…Is this the effect of the candy?'

Yuni rolled the candy in her mouth.

Luna had mentioned its pain-relieving effects, but like most medicines, it could have other effects too.

'Could it be a sedative effect?'

Yuni sighed in relief.

Anyway, this was good.

Now that she had calmed down, it was best to finish quickly.

"Yuni student, please start whenever you're ready," the announcer's voice came.

"Whew…"

Yuni exhaled deeply.

She recalled Rudy's words.

These people in front of her knew nothing.

She was different from her past self.

In the past, those in front of her had been superior, but not now.

In terms of skills, potential, or status, she was not inferior.

'Just watch my superior self.'

Yuni smiled and began.

"Yuni Von Ristonia. I'll start now."

She closed her eyes.

Mana began to flow.

'Just do as I've always done.'

Crackle—

A small spark flickered above Yuni's head.

'Just as the professor taught me.'

Yuni extended her finger towards the scarecrow in front of her.

Electricity began to swirl around.

Small static charges caused her hair to stand on end.

Yuni had spent her time in Gracie's lab during the first semester and the holidays.

She did odd jobs and assisted with research, experiencing significant growth in a short period.

She had progressed in magic, now able to use intermediate spells.

But staying in Gracie's lab meant she had no one to teach her intermediate magic.

That's when Gracie caught her eye.

As a professor, Gracie's teaching skills were beyond doubt, and being there daily meant Yuni could ask questions directly.

Of course, she wasn't without other options.

She could have learned from another professor using her princess status.

But with Gracie there daily, she saw no reason to seek lessons elsewhere.

The intermediate magic Yuni learned was Gracie's lightning magic.

"Scatter mana around…”

Yuni murmured softly, raising her finger towards the sky.

"Strike down…!"

"Lightning Strike!"

The mana surrounding Yuni converged on her fingertip.

The mana transformed into static electricity, swirling around her finger.

As Yuni slashed her finger towards the scarecrow, the gathered electricity shot out.

It formed a strong electrical charge, whipping out like a lash.

Crackle-Zap—

The electricity from Yuni's hand perfectly struck the scarecrow.

Just like she had practiced.

Exactly as she had prepared.

A direct hit.

The scarecrow was precisely hit by Yuni's technique, currents of electricity coursing through it.

Yuni stared blankly at the scene.

"It worked, it's done."

She didn't know what score she might receive, but the corners of her mouth lifted in satisfaction for executing as planned.

But only for a moment.

"Wow!!!"

"Lightning magic? I didn't know the princess could use such magic."

"This is impressive…"

Voices from the crowd reached her.

"Ah…"

Hearing those voices, the same feeling from earlier began to return.

"I, I need the bathroom…"

She couldn't stay here any longer.

"Yuni student?"

Yuni quickly turned around.

And started running.

If she stayed here… she might make a mistake.

A disaster could ensue.

"Yu, Yuni student! Your score hasn't been announced yet, where are you going!!"

Yuni ignored the announcer's words and ran towards the bathroom.

"I did quite well."

I smiled contentedly, looking at the first-year score chart.

Yuni had boldly secured second place for herself, just narrowly behind Diark in first.

If her condition had been a bit better, she could have easily taken the top spot.

Though Yuni was the one evaluated, I felt a pang of disappointment.

Still, second place was good enough to aim for the top in the joint assessment.

"Anyway."

I shifted my gaze.

"Isn't it time to start?"

As I spoke, the announcer's voice echoed.

"We will now begin the second-year individual assessments."

The evaluation wasn't just for first years.

Second years had to be assessed too.

And the first candidate was…

"Rudy Astria, please wait in the corridor."

It was me.

I had already checked the order and was waiting in the corridor, monitoring the first-year scores.

"Yuni did well, and now…"

It was my turn to perform.

I had a goal.

I wanted to surpass Astina's score when she was a second-year.

This time, I realized something.

Astina was even more impressive than I had thought.

Despite only a year's difference, I felt a significant gap.

The gap felt more tangible after fighting her directly.

But it wasn't unreachable.

I had set my sights on a target.

Catching up to Astina right now was impossible.

So, I planned to slowly reach that goal, starting by catching up to Astina as she was in her second year.

"Rudy Astria, the second son of the Astria family and top student in the second year! He showed a shocking performance as a first year, and now we are excited to see what he will bring this time!"

I walked out slowly into the corridor.

Many faces were visible outside.

"It's been a while since I've been here…”

I hadn't been able to look around leisurely like this when I was a first-year.

I was too tense and focused on what I had to do.

But now, it was different.

My condition was at its peak.

Between student council work, lab duties, and sparring with Astina…

A few days of rest from these demanding tasks made me feel restless, eager to move.

'I want to start moving right away.'

"Rudy student, just let us know when you're ready."

"Yes, I'll start right away."

I responded promptly to the announcer.

Eager to move, I gathered my mana and looked up.

At the end, Astina was looking at me indifferently.

Seeing her, I couldn't help but smile.

I fiddled with my gloves.

The mana stone on the back of the glove reacted to my mana, emitting a small light.

'It's 40,000 points.'

I recalled Astina's score from her second year.

With that thought, I let out a smile.

"It's easy enough."

I dashed forward.

The wind brushed through my hair, giving a pleasant sensation.

Mana gathered in my gloves, sending a tingling sensation from my hands up my arms.

As I sprinted forward, the scarecrow came into view. I pulled my arm back.

Twisting my waist like hitting a punching machine, I drew my arm as far back as possible.

"Inhale!"

Then with all my might.

With the greatest strength.

Boom!

I slammed the scarecrow to the ground.

CHAPTER 179
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT 2 (4)

"Did you see that?"

I smiled and faced Astina.

"What's so great about surpassing my second year score?"

Astina spoke as if it was nothing, but she was smiling.

My score was 70,000 points.

It was a score that far exceeded Astina's when she was in her second year.

Astina, still smiling, turned her head slightly.

"It seems like it's time to manage your expression."

"Ah… Hmm."

I touched around my mouth with an awkward expression.

Below, Luna was climbing up, her face devoid of strength.

"Sniffle…"

"Why the long face when you did well!"

Next to Luna was Rie.

Rie was holding Luna's hand, helping her up.

She looked like a mother leading her daughter.

Astina smiled and looked at Luna.

"Luna, well done."

"Astina! At times like this, you shouldn't say 'well done' but rather scold for not doing better."

Rie spoke sharply.

"Luna didn't mean for it to happen, maybe we should just let it be…"

"No! When you do something wrong, you need to be scolded."

"Sniffle…"

Luna shrank under Rie's scolding.

She huddled and looked miserable.

"I'm such a fool… I'm such a fool…"

Luna had made a mistake during the assessment.

Her attack didn't hit the target properly, and the score was… disappointingly low.

The reason for this actually lay with me.

After my assessment, the ground was left in a mess.

My attack had created a pit in the ground and stones had scattered around.

The professors did their best to fix the ground, but they couldn't do it properly due to the need to proceed quickly with the assessments.

Luna, who was next, tripped over an uneven stone while trying to cast her spell.

As she fell, the spell was released and barely grazed the target.

If it hadn't hit the target at all, she might have had a chance to try again…

It was both ridiculous and regrettable.

"Anyway, individual assessments don't significantly affect your score, so don't worry."

Astina approached Luna with a warm smile and stooped down a bit.

"There are still opportunities ahead."

Luna's clothes were covered in dust and dirt from falling, and Astina began to brush it off.

"Sigh…"

Rie sighed and looked at Luna.

It seemed that even Rie had spoken out of concern for Luna, knowing how hard she had tried.

But I had a lingering question.

"Luna, about the spell you used… did you choose that spell on purpose?"

"Ah…"

The spell Luna had chosen was not particularly remarkable.

The magic was a wind attribute spell that had been enhanced several times.

It was simply a spell that created a lance of wind and hurled it swiftly.

While its power was considerable, if asked whether it was Luna's best effort, I could confidently answer 'no'.

Luna, who primarily uses magical tools, could have come up with more unique ideas…

In fact, the telekinetic magic tool she used in her first year was more impressive.

"Was it, intentional? Or, maybe it couldn't be helped…"

"…What?"

Rie glared at Luna again.

Thunk—

Rie approached Luna and gave her a knock on the head.

Luna held her head and let out a few tears.

"Rie…!"

"If you didn't give it your best, accept the results! You shouldn't just rely on luck!"

"I had my reasons though…"

Luna muttered, pouting her lips slightly.

"We'll end up really fighting if this goes on. Stop it, Rie."

"Hmph…"

Rie turned her head, clearly displeased.

"Rudy, you should go and finish the rest of your assessments. Didn't you say you're not done yet?"

"Ah, yes. I understand…"

Although I was worried about Rie and Luna's situation, I still had to complete my assessments.

"I'll be back then. Those two…"

"Yes, I'll look after them."

The way she said it felt like leaving kids with a babysitter, but with Astina there, I doubted they'd get into any trouble.

"Alright… I'm counting on you."

"Ouch…”

I fiddled with my finger from which blood had been drawn.

"Isn't there something like a needle around…?"

Here, they didn't use needles to draw blood.

Instead, a cut was made on the finger with a knife to extract a few drops of blood.

It was a crude method but efficient.

Since the blood tests weren't in-depth, a large quantity of blood wasn't necessary.

Most tests were conducted using magic, and the blood was only examined for its mana content.

Since not much blood was needed, a sterilized knife was used to make a quick cut, foregoing any special tools.

It was faster and cost-effective.

But, slicing your finger with a knife was more painful than expected.

It's like stubbing your little toe hurts more than getting hit hard elsewhere.

It was a similar concept.

I wrapped my finger with a cloth and headed towards the open field, quickening my pace.

It was Rie's turn now; her name had just been called.

I was curious about what Rie had learned from Serina and what abilities she would use.

While I could guess, seeing it firsthand was different.

Only by seeing it could I understand the principles behind her abilities.

"I might be a bit late…"

Just when I was undergoing the test, it was Rie's turn.

I couldn't just say I'd come back later for my test, so I was hurrying as fast as I could.

"What's this?"

Arriving at the open field, I looked around.

In the center of the field, flames were rising.

"An explosive magic spell?"

It was the explosive magic that Rie usually used.

I thought she would use spirits after being trained by Serina…

"Student Rie! 27,300 points!"

It was a high score.

Did she achieve that score with just her magic?

But that didn't seem quite right.

Next to Rie, a green-colored hawk, Sylph, the intermediate wind elemental, was flying.

The ground near the flames bore scars.

It looked as though it had been sliced with a blade.

"What happened here?"

"Hey! Rudy!"

While I was muttering to myself, Luna called out to me.

Her expression was better than before.

I asked Luna.

"Luna, what did Rie just do?"

Luna looked troubled.

"Ah… well…"

"…?"

I tilted my head in confusion as Luna hesitated.

Luna pointed towards the center of the field.

Rie was looking in our direction.

She had her index finger raised to her lips.

As if to say, 'be quiet'…

"Rie told me… not to tell Rudy…"

"Why?"

"She's annoyed. She said you should have come sooner if you were really curious."

Why would she need to hide it…?

Rie's expression in the field suggested she was just in a bad mood and didn't want to talk.

I sighed.

Luna seemed like she wasn't going to tell me anything, probably because Rie had persuaded her.

After being scolded by Rie, Luna probably just nodded in agreement.

I could pretty much picture the scene.

But there was another way.

"Where's Astina?"

"She said she saw enough of your test and just left. Said there wasn't much else to see…"

"Not even Rie's assessment?"

"Yeah, she said she felt like moving around after watching us perform our abilities and just left."

"…"

My plan was thwarted.

Maybe she left early, thinking Rie and Luna wouldn't fight…

"So you should have moved faster, right?"

As I was sighing, Rie walked up behind me, chiding me.

"How could I come faster when I was in the middle of a test?"

"You could have watched me and then taken your test."

"I prefer to get things over with quickly."

Rie glared at me.

"See, I told you. She's annoyed."

"…Alright, I'm sorry."

"If you're sorry, hug me. Then I'll tell you about my ability."

"…What?"

Suddenly, Luna, who had been sitting beside us, sprang up.

"No, no! Not with people around! Oh, no!"

Luna quickly stood up between us.

"If that's what it takes for her to talk, I'll tell you!"

"Ugh…"

Seeing Luna's fierce reaction, Rie clicked her tongue.

"Fine. Let's just drop it."

"Good!"

"Let's sit down. We're attracting attention."

"…Ah."

There weren't many people around, but after Luna's outburst, everyone was staring at us.

Luna's cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

"Sorry, sorry."

She muttered quietly and quickly returned to her seat.

"But is there anything else to see? Seems like we've seen everything."

As Rie walked back to her seat, she shrugged nonchalantly.

"It's still good to check out everyone's abilities. To see what they can do and how much they've grown."

Most of the people sitting around had the same thought process.

The joint assessment was about analyzing each other's capabilities and deciding how to act.

"Do we really need to? After all, you're the top and there's no one else to match

you…”

Rie was about to sit down when she suddenly widened her eyes, looking at the field.

“…What's that?"

I followed her gaze, turning to look at the field.

In the field was…

"Evan?"

Evan was standing there, but that wasn’t what was surprising.

"Why is the field suddenly…”

The field, which had been just dirt, was now sprouting blue flowers and grass.

And behind Evan, a large tree had appeared.

Evan held his sword.

White lights rose from the surrounding grass, flowers, and the tree.

These lights began to converge on the sword.

As they gathered, the sword was enveloped in a blue glow.

Evan charged towards the target dummy.

And then.

A massive burst of light enveloped the field.

CHAPTER 180
INDIVIDUAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT 2 (5)

"Second place again?"

I received the second-place ranking in the individual assessment.

But I wasn't disheartened.

Just moments ago.

Evan had unleashed a massive technique.

The ground around us shook, and a bright light enveloped the area.

After everything settled.

Evan staggered and almost collapsed.

People nearby quickly moved to take Evan to the infirmary.

It seemed like the backlash from using such a large-scale technique had caught up with him.

I was dumbfounded watching this.

Normally, such techniques aren't used in individual assessments.

While it is an assessment, it's essentially a scouting exercise.

One doesn't reveal their full strength.

The individual assessment is merely a stepping stone for the joint assessment.

Since the joint assessment carries more weight in scoring, focus should be there.

Revealing all one's cards during the individual assessment can lead to poor scores in the joint assessment.

It leaves one completely analyzed.

However, Evan's technique this time was an exception.

The intense light that wrapped around the clearing made it difficult to discern how the technique was activated.

Fortunately, it was clear that using that technique resulted in backlash for Evan.

"But how do I counter that…?"

The area behind where the scarecrow stood was completely blown open.

The wall erected to contain the power had been breached.

Seeing this gave a rough idea of the scale of Evan's technique.

Could I break through that wall?

Directly hitting the wall would be easy, but it's impossible to do so with power escaping elsewhere.

Then could I counter that technique?

No certain answer came to mind.

Yet, I smiled.

Right.

This is the level I need to be at.

A competitive spirit ignited within me.

In this joint assessment, I planned to face Evan head-on.

Of course, if Evan showed any signs of contacting the Rebels, I'd immediately

suppress him, but otherwise, I'd let him be.

It was the least I could do, a trap laid for capturing the Rebels.

Setting that aside.

"There's nothing I can do about coming in second…"

I hadn't used mana to the point of collapsing.

I thought it more efficient to have enough mana to continue train than use an excessive amount of mana.

With my best effort in the joint assessment, I could easily overturn the ranking.

Of course, my pride was hurt.

I felt envious that Evan could demonstrate such power, considering all the hard work I had put in so far.

But all these feelings fueled my motivation.

I had a reason to become stronger.

To beat Evan.

To completely defeat him.

To the extent that the Rebels wouldn't even come to mind.

It was a short-term, clear goal.

I smiled.

"Let's give it a try."

Evan hadn't planned to use that technique originally.

After all, the individual assessment didn't hold much significance.

But watching Rudy's attempt changed his mind.

He wanted to win.

Desperately so.

That's why he resorted to a secret technique instead of his intended one.

It was the most powerful technique he could muster.

'The conditions weren't ideal, though… '

Evan's ecological magic was stronger when surrounded by plants.

He had reached the level where he could even spontaneously grow grass with mana, but naturally grown plants allowed him to use even bigger spells than artificially created ones.

"Evan!"

Just then, Yeniel burst into the infirmary.

"Evan, are you okay?"

"Uh… I don't think I'm in bad shape."

Evan tried moving his body.

He had been dizzy from overusing mana just before, but he was starting to feel better.

"More importantly… Do you know how I ranked?"

Evan had been brought to the infirmary before the assessment officially ended.

He hadn't been able to check his rank or score.

Yeniel sighed upon seeing him.

"You came first. Scored nearly 90,000 points."

Only then did Evan smile.

"That's a relief…"

"It's just an individual assessment. Why go all out with such a technique?"

Yeniel chided him.

"As long as I'm first, it's fine."

But Evan just smiled, satisfied.

"Being first here could put you at a disadvantage in the joint assessment, you know?"

"If I come first there too, by beating Rudy Astria…"

Upon hearing Rudy Astria's name, Yeniel's expression hardened.

"Evan, there's something I've been wondering."

"Hmm?"

"Why are you so intent on being the top student?"

The reason to be the top student.

Why he needed to be first.

Evan had never questioned this before.

He pondered for a moment before responding.

"…To become stronger. The privileges of being top student and…"

Before Evan could finish, Yeniel interjected.

"What will you do with more power?"

"More power… for what?"

Evan couldn't think of an answer.

What to do with the strength he sought.

'Why am I trying to become stronger?'

It was a fundamental question.

Evan had simply been following the academy's directives, striving to be at the top in its competitive system.

When he first entered the academy, he had the reason of tuition fees, but even that was no longer a concern.

He had saved enough money that tuition wasn't an issue.

Nor was he particularly desperate for the privileges of being the top student.

In fact, those privileges felt overwhelming to him.

There were many benefits that Evan had never used.

Just having a space to train and study was enough for growth.

The large number of benefits didn't contribute much to his development.

As Evan fell into confusion, Yeniel spoke up.

"In my view, you've lost your way. You lack a genuine goal of wanting to be the top student. It seems like you're just obsessed with the competition."

"Obsessed with the competition…"

"Rudy Astria."

At the mention of that name, Evan's eyes widened.

"It looks like you're just feeling inferior to Rudy Astria."

Evan clenched his fist, feeling something boiling inside him.

"Evan, you…"

"Yeniel."

Evan interrupted Yeniel.

"…Yes, I feel inferior to Rudy Astria. You're right, it's not about wanting to be the top student as much as wanting to beat Rudy Astria. Is that wrong? Can't that be my purpose?"

Evan vented his frustration.

He revealed what had been inside him.

Something he had never told anyone before.

But.

"No, that's not okay."

Yeniel denied his words.

"If what you were doing was just child's play, it wouldn't matter. But you're not ready to take responsibility for your power. You don't even know where your sword should be pointed."

"But…"

"Evan."

Yeniel looked him straight in the eye.

"Then what will you do if Rudy Astria suddenly disappears?"

Evan stopped, mouth agape at Yeniel's question.

If Rudy Astria was gone…

"If Rudy Astria gives up everything and vanishes."

Yeniel asked again.

"What will you do then?"

"I'll survive."

After the individual ability assessment ended, Yuni emerged from the bathroom, wiping away the cold sweat.

All the tension had dissipated now that everything was over.

She was satisfied with her score.

Though she hadn't ranked first, it was still an achievement worth smiling about, especially since there were more assessments to come.

"Uh… Yuni?"

"Seniors? You're all here?"

As she walked out of the bathroom, she ran into Rudy's group.

"Yuni, are you okay?"

Rie was the first to show concern for Yuni.

Rie examined Yuni with a worried expression.

"I wasn't feeling great earlier, but I'm okay now."

Yuni smiled at Rie, reassuring her.

She didn't want to cause Rie any worry.

"I was really worried because you looked unwell today."

"It's okay because you worried about me, sister!"

Seeing Yuni's bright face, Rie also smiled.

"Usually, you only get nervous when something's going on. Looks like it was nothing serious this time."

At those words, both Rudy and Yuni felt a pang of guilt.

Normally, Yuni wouldn't have been nervous in such a situation.

She didn't typically get nervous just because many people were watching.

She became tense only when there was a reason, and then, in the presence of many people.

But she couldn't tell Rie the truth just yet.

'Sister… I'll tell you later.'

Yuni apologized silently to Rie and moistened her lips.

"Still, you did really well on the score."

Rudy joined the conversation with a smile, trying to change the subject.

Yuni laughed at Rudy's remark.

"Right? I did score well~. And I even got the same rank as Rudy."

Rudy glared at Yuni playfully.

"Why are you picking on me all of a sudden?"

"Pick on you? Coming second is still a great achievement, right?"

Yuni was right.

Second place was indeed an excellent achievement, but for Rudy, it held a different meaning.

He had always been second, after all.

Yuni knew this, and Rudy realized she was aware.

"Oh… Taking care of you only to hear such words…"

"You took care of me, senior?"

"Weren't you nervous? I came to see you myself."

Yuni tilted her head, puzzled.

"How is that taking care of me? Was that even helpful? The real help came from Luna~."

Yuni smiled and looked back at Luna.

"Ahaha…"

Yuni approached Luna, loosening the clothes tied around her waist.

"Thank you, senior. This was really helpful."

"I'm glad it was useful."

"Huh…"

Rudy watched the scene with an incredulous look.

"Oh, and the candy you gave me! I enjoyed it so much! Ah… Now that I think about it, I should thank Ena too."

"Ah… Right. That candy…"

Luna responded with an awkward smile.

"That candy really worked wonders! When I was about to start my assessment…"

"Yuni… Ena told me… that was just a regular candy. It doesn't have any pain relief effect or anything like that… I was about to tell you earlier."

“…What?"

Yuni tilted her head in confusion.

"I was sure… after eating it, I felt better… It even seemed to have a calming effect…”

Yuni spoke, her face a mix of puzzlement and disbelief.

"Ena said it was just an ordinary candy she made. Nothing special in it…”

A question mark popped up in Yuni's mind.

She had intended to thank Ena profusely, believing the candy to have been incredibly effective.

But to hear that it was just a regular candy without any medicinal properties.

"Then why did I feel better…?"

Yuni mused to herself, still tilting her head, lost in thought.

CHAPTER 181
DIRECTION (1)

Gracie's Research Lab.

"It's too much… everyone is just too much…"

Gracie was once again muttering words of despair today.

"Professor Cromwell…! Professor Mcguire…! Professor Robert!!!"

Robert had extended his vacation since the holidays and had not yet returned.

Mcguire was busy with research at an academy in the capital.

As a result, Cromwell had tasked Gracie with something.

-Midterm exam, you come up with the questions.

It was unfair.

The exam questions that Robert and Mcguire should have handled were all assigned to Gracie.

This midterm exam was the one before the joint assessment, so there were fewer questions to prepare.

Still, the increase in workload was saddening.

Gracie had been living comfortably, having completed her research during the holidays.

Now, suddenly burdened with work, she found it hard to even pick up a pen.

Gracie gritted her teeth.

'Right, I won't just take this lying down… '

Gracie had been continuously mistreated by the professors for the past half year.

If she has to continue this professor job for decades, she might just die.

It was time to find a way to survive.

Gracie opened a drawer.

Inside was a massive amount of documents.

The contents were Liberion Academy's exams for the past five years.

Documents with the contents and solutions of all subjects' exams.

'I did well to get this from Astina… '

Gracie had secretly obtained these documents.

Originally intended for reference, but in her current state, it wasn't going to end at just referencing.

'After all, the questions are all the same… '

Exams are a way to ask students if they know the content.

Even if the questions are different, as long as the intent of question is the same, it shouldn't matter.

Gracie began to smirk and copy them onto the exam paper.

"Hmm~ Hmm~"

Gracie hummed a tune, praising herself for coming up with such an idea.

However, Gracie had overlooked something.

The fact that she wasn't the only one with the documents, and even if one doesn't understand the content, they could still had the answers to them.

Gracie, under great stress, had missed these minor details.

The novice professor Gracie, unaware of what was to come, continued to diligently write down the exam questions.

"Good work today."

I wiped the sweat off with my sleeve and looked at Astina.

"Yeah, you too."

Astina was smiling pleasantly.

It was a few days before the midterm exams, but I was training.

Right now, the joint assessment was the most important thing.

The midterms for the second semester had a smaller scope and less impact on grades.

The joint assessment was much more significant.

I had an intense discussion with Astina.

I explained Evan's techniques to her and pondered countermeasures.

However, the results were disappointing.

Astina, an exceptional wizard, couldn't understand my perspective during combat.

She was a user of telekinetic magic, capable of moving, attacking, and defending.

Ultimately, we started sparring without finding a proper countermeasure.

I chose to experience things physically rather than just sit and discuss.

Astina countered me with techniques similar to those used by Evan, which had a large range.

Astina stared at me intently and then spoke.

"So, did you understand anything?"

“…Not at all."

Maybe because my opponent was Astina, I couldn't even touch the hem of her sleeve.

I was like a dog chasing chickens.

"Don't worry, Evan is not as tough as me."

She was right.

Evan couldn't move as fast as Astina when using techniques.

"If I had at least managed to touch a strand of your hair, it would've been a little comforting… But now, I guess we can't even spar."

"That's not necessarily the case. If you come up with any ideas, we can still spar from time to time."

Astina was going to be busy for a while.

She had plans to craft a staff since she had some time.

Creating her own magic circle and researching meant she wouldn't have leisure time for sparring like now.

Anyway, I also needed time to think on my own, so it wasn't a big problem.

After wiping off her sweat, Astina packed her things.

"Well, I should be going now."

"Already? Why don't you rest a bit more?"

"No. If I'm going to rest, I'd rather do it comfortably in my room. Resting in this sweaty state will only make me tired."

I watched Astina for a moment, then spoke.

"Besides making a staff, have you been up to anything else lately?"

"Hmm? Why do you ask that all of a sudden?"

Astina tilted her head, seemingly puzzled by my question.

"It's just that, other than when we spar, it's hard to see you around."

Rie, Luna, and others seemed to have more free time after the holidays, often eating together and talking.

But Astina was different.

Even roaming around the Academy, it was hard to catch a glimpse of her.

I hadn't worried much about it initially, thinking it was just part of her solo training routine, but it was starting to concern me.

Staying holed up in a room and training incessantly can be exhausting.

Meeting people occasionally was essential for maintaining efficiency in both research and training.

"I'm not particularly busy with anything."

"Then, please, show your face around sometimes. Everyone is worried about you."

I said this with a playful smile.

Astina chuckled at my words.

"I'll try to, when I have the time."

With that, Astina disappeared outside the training grounds.

"Hmm…"

I watched her retreating figure intently.

Something had been off about her since our last encounter.

Looking at Astina, I couldn't shake off a feeling of unease.

It seemed as though she was deliberately keeping a distance from us.

Otherwise, it would be impossible not to cross paths with her in the Academy.

After pondering for a moment, I brushed off these thoughts.

"She'll manage on her own."

Even if there were troubles, she would overcome them soon enough.

After all, she is Astina Persia.

Yet, despite trying to reassure myself, I couldn’t shake off the feeling of unease.

In the Astria territory.

"Is that really true?"

Ian stood before his father, Perrian Astria.

"Yes, it's true."

Ian's eyes widened at his father's confirmation.

It was hard for him to understand that the Duke family would dabble in necromancy.

The Astria family was already powerful without resorting to such magic, a ducal house of the empire that bowed to no one, capable of even keeping the emperor in check.

Why would such a family stoop to such deplorable acts?

Ian couldn't make sense of it.

"I intended to tell you when you inherited the family."

Perrian clicked his tongue.

Ian had never defied his father, but this time, it was hard to hold back.

"I don't understand, Father."

It was a vulnerability that could lead to the downfall of the family.

And if the rebels were involved…

A lineage of ducal rule spanning several generations could collapse in an instant.

"We must sever ties with them now. If the emperor's faction catches wind of this…!"

"Ian."

Perrian looked at Ian, who was losing his temper.

"You don't understand anything."

Thump.

Ian slammed his hand down on the table in front of him.

"It's you who doesn't understand, Father!"

"Hmm…"

Perrian pursed his lips and then stood up.

"Follow me."

"What?"

Ian furrowed his brow at his father's words.

Perrian, unfazed, moved on.

They arrived at a vault within the mansion.

Perrian naturally reached out to the vault.

A light began to emanate from it, spreading out to form a magic circle.

Click.

The sound of the vault opening echoed.

It was a vault bound by a magic circle.

"What is this vault?"

Ian looked suspiciously at Perrian.

Perrian didn't answer but opened the vault.

Inside were only manastones, nothing else.

"This is…"

Ian's eyes widened at the sight of the manastones.

Perrian chuckled at his reaction.

"These are manastones created through necromancy."

Treating them like treasures, Perrian took out a handkerchief and reached into the vault.

He retrieved a manastone from its depths.

"The amount of mana…"

The mere presence of the manastone emanated an overwhelming aura.

It was just a manastone, but its power surpassed even the finest quality stones.

The amount of mana was unbelievable.

Ian couldn't trust his eyes.

It was more mana than even a royal wizard would have.

This level of mana is enough to use high-level magic, usually reserved for great wizards.

Ian was speechless.

Perrian laughed at Ian's dumbfounded expression.

"Now you see. This is the result of dabbling in necromancy."

Perrian put the manastone back in the vault.

"What happens if other nobles or the emperor himself finds out? With these powerful manastones, the Astria family is untouchable."

Seeing the manastones, Ian understood what Perrian meant.

If used properly, these manastones could obliterate a city in no time.

In other words, the Astria family could destroy the empire if provoked.

"We only have two of this level for now, but given time, we'll be beyond reach."

Perrian smiled.

Ian's expression hardened.

"Why go to the lengths of creating such dangerous items? The Astria family already possesses great power. Such risky items are…"

If these manastones were used not in an border city but in the capital's heart…

They could obliterate the capital itself.

The problem was that these manastones were not produced by the Astria family but by necromancers.

The Astria family could very well become victims of their own creation.

"Tsk…"

Ian's words made Perrian click his tongue.

"Are you content with the Astria family's power? My son?"

"What… are you saying?"

"You're thinking too small. It's shameful to call you my son."

Perrian pointed upwards.

"The Astria family can ascend even higher. We are a family capable of using space magic, said to be wielded only by gods. Why should we remain under a powerless emperor?"

"Father?"

"Do you not understand why I entrusted you with the family's affairs?"

Perrian was still fit to be the head of the family.

He had no reason to retire, neither in age nor health.

"I will become the emperor."

He had been preparing in the Astria territory.

Preparing for a revolution…

"Then, the rebels…"

Ian's words made Perrian click his tongue again.

"They are irrelevant. I only recently learned that some of the necromancers were rebel leaders. Our prestigious family would never align with such insignificant beings."

Perrian dusted off his handkerchief and put it away.

"Now go. Do not interfere with your father's work."

Ian just stood there even after Perrian had left.

He just stared at the vault containing the manastones

CHAPTER 182
DIRECTION (2)

In the Academy's vice-principal office, Cromwell sat reviewing exam questions.

Usually, one professor does not review another's exam questions.

It's seen as overstepping and disrespectful, even if a professor might make a mistake.

However, Gracie was having her questions reviewed by Cromwell.

"What's going on here…"

Cromwell never intended to review the questions.

It started when Cromwell was compiling the exam papers from various professors.

One question, previously set by Cromwell himself last year, caught his eye.

It was so familiar that he recognized it at a glance.

This prompted Cromwell to review other questions.

"I asked for questions, not for copying…"

"I'm sorry… so sorry,"

Gracie apologized repeatedly, looking distressed.

Cromwell sighed, unable to be harsh with such an apology.

He realized his own fault too.

"I was too harsh on a new professor…"

Cromwell knew Gracie, so he didn't treat her like a new professor.

Though she often complained and seemed clumsy, she handled her tasks well, feeling like a veteran professor.

"It's my mistake…"

Cromwell had given too much responsibility to a new professor.

Even someone as resilient as Gracie could break down.

Cromwell skimmed through the questions and laid the exam paper on the desk.

"Is the midterm in 3 days?"

"Yes… I'll redo the questions in these 3 days!"

"No, there's no time to redo and prepare the exam papers. We can't afford that."

Gracie looked despondent.

"I'm sorry… I'll take responsibility."

"Take responsibility?"

"I'll… resign from my professorship."

"What?"

Cromwell stood up abruptly.

"No, Gracie! You did nothing wrong! It's my fault for overburdening you. I'll take responsibility."

"No, it's my fault. I should be punished…"

"No!"

Cromwell was firm.

If Gracie was punished, she wouldn't be able to teach for a while, which was unacceptable.

"I'll take responsibility. We'll use these questions."

"What?"

"These copied questions are from Mcguire and Robert. If we don't raise the issue of plagiarism, it can be overlooked. Many professors set similar questions, so it won't become a serious problem."

Cromwell organized the papers in front of him.

"Let's drop this matter. I said I'll take responsibility."

Gracie was moved by Cromwell's stance, yet she had her doubts.

Why was Cromwell reacting this way, not even scolding her?

'Gracie is a slave… no, a talent that can't be easily let go.'

Gracie didn't know Cromwell's thoughts and was just grateful he was protecting her.

On the day of the midterm exams, I slowly walked towards the classroom.

The hallway was bustling with students.

Usually, there's a palpable tension in the air on exam day, but today it seemed unusually relaxed.

Perhaps because midterms aren't as pressure-packed as final exams, even my classmates and I feel more at ease.

Yesterday, we all gathered for a last-minute study session.

Using the study guides I had, we quizzed each other as a final review.

Even Luna and Rie seemed more light-hearted than usual, though there was some nervousness, likely due to the upcoming joint assessments rather than the midterms.

"I just want to get this over with and focus on training,"

I muttered to myself as I continued towards the classroom.

"Hey, you're here?"

Rie greeted me as I entered.

"Looks like we're in the same exam room, huh?"

"Yeah, it's the first time we're taking an exam in the same classroom,"

Rie replied with a bright smile.

"You seem well-rested. Did you sleep okay?"

"There was no reason I wouldn't. I've pretty much finished studying, and I wasn't worried. I'm feeling so confident I might even nab the top spot."

Rie said with a shrug, her playful tone lightening my mood.

"Everyone, start wrapping up your preparations. The exam starts in 10 minutes,"

Announced a professor at the front of the room.

"Yeah, good luck with your exam."

"You too, don’t let me steal the top spot from you."

Rie said before heading back to her seat.

A little while later, the professor said,

"Alright, let's start the exam."

We received our papers and started to read through the questions.

"…?"

While reading, I came across a question that was eerily familiar.

No, it was identical to one we had reviewed the night before.

Initially, I thought it might just be a similar question, but even the choices were the same.

Perplexed, I looked up and caught Rie's eye.

She seemed to have noticed something odd as well.

"Please, no looking around. It’s exam time."

"Oh, right… Sorry."

We both murmured and returned to our papers.

Seeing Rie's reaction confirmed my suspicion that something was off.

I quickly scanned through the exam.

To my astonishment, several questions from our study guide were on the test.

This was bizarre.

Was this some kind of dream?

I pinched my cheek.

Despite the pain, the situation remained unchanged.

Well, there was nothing else to do but solve the problems.

Though I wondered what the professors were thinking in setting such questions, I couldn't help but chuckle.

The only issue was that I wasn't the only one who had seen the study guide.

Could such an exam really differentiate students' abilities?

While I was concerned, all I could do was my best.

The day after the exams, I found myself staring intently at an apology notice pinned to the bulletin board.

"I knew it would come to this…”

After discussing with Luna and Rie post-exam, we were convinced that the exam was a mess.

Upon revisiting the study guide, we realized that the choices in the exam questions matched those in the guide.

Eventually, Cromwell had to issue an apology to the students.

The notice was filled with odd phrases about the lack of communication and misunderstandings, but in summary, it all boiled down to Gracie's mistake.

Many professors were out on business, and Gracie had ended up shouldering their burden.

My gaze drifted from the apology notice to the adjacent board.

There, the students' rankings were listed.

[1. Rudy Astria 1. Rie Von Ristonia 1. Luna Railer

The day after the exam, I was staring at the list of top scorers, still in disbelief.

"There were 38 perfect scorers."

It seemed that everyone who had the study guide ended up tying for first place.

"This is ridiculous…”

"I know, right…”

"What's this?"

Startled by the sudden voice, I turned around to find Yuni standing behind me, hands

clasped behind her back.

"Senior, hello?"

"You scared me there."

"I did make some noise coming here. You just didn’t notice because you were so focused in your thoughts,"

Yuni said, raising her hands in a gesture of innocence while smiling.

"Anyway, this is a real mess, isn't it?"

Yuni commented, pointing to the second-year rankings.

"Indeed… it's a complete mess."

I continued to gaze at the rankings.

"Huh?"

Something struck me as odd.

A name that should have been there was missing.

Evan's name.

Among those who had tied for first place, I couldn’t find Evan’s name anywhere.

I widened my eyes and scanned the rankings.

[41. Evan]

Lowering my gaze, I finally saw Evan's name.

"Hmm…”

Evan was in a low position.

Seeing this ranking made me feel uneasy.

Should I be happy about this?

Many had benefited from having the guide, but it had caused others to suffer.

I had been lucky to avoid this fate, but my name could easily have been in that lower position.

'Luck is part of skill,' they say, but this type of luck didn't feel very satisfying.

"The joint assessment is going to be a battlefield…"

Cromwell's apology hinted that the joint assessment would be more challenging to offset the skewed midterm results.

It meant that even if there was a significant difference in the midterm rankings, it could be overturned in the joint assessment.

"The joint assessment is going to be even more intense. Still, I bet I'll win."

Yuni said confidently.

"Are you sure you can win?"

The joint assessment is an activity involving both first and second years.

With the second-year rankings in disarray, it was clear there would be a desperate struggle.

In such a fierce battle, it's the first years who stand to lose the most.

Who knows what the second years might do to earn points in the joint assessment.

They might target the first years.

The format of the joint assessment hadn't been announced yet, but it was clear that the first years were feeling uneasy.

However, Yuni didn't seem particularly bothered.

"Actually, I'm starting special training with Professor Gracie today."

"Is Professor Gracie even in the right state of mind for that?"

After all the chaos of the exam…

"Professor Cromwell told her to lay low for a while. So, she's using the time to help me with my magic."

That made sense.

Gracie wouldn’t have been able to handle this situation alone.

Cromwell stepping in gave her some breathing space.

I nodded.

"Alright, then. Let’s give it our all in the joint assessment."

"Sure, good luck, senior."

Yuni said and walked away.

I was about to head off for my own training.

"Hmm…”

Before leaving, I glanced back at the list again and looked at Evan's name.

Winning this way didn’t feel right.

But there's still a chance to compete fairly in the joint assessment.

Still, there was a lingering bitterness in my mouth.

CHAPTER 183
DIRECTION (3)

[Joint Assessment for 1st and 2nd Year Students]

The assessment is primarily individual.

However, the actions to be taken during the assessment are not specified.

The duration is three days and two nights, held in the Gotrin Mountains.

Individuals can earn points through combat in the mountains, and these points determine their ranking.

There are two ways to gain points: incapacitate another student in combat or capture magical beasts in the mountains.

Points are assigned based on the strength of the beasts, and scores are awarded according to contribution.

If a student incapacitates another, they can earn points proportional to that student's individual assessment rank and the points that student had earned.

If a 2nd-year student incapacitates a 1st-year student, they can only earn half of the points the 1st-year student had.

Once a student is incapacitated, they cannot participate further and their score is finalized.

Yeniel looked over these rules.

"It seems well thought out."

Everyone was paying attention to how the assessment would be conducted, as the

2nd-year midterms lacked differentiation.

This method would satisfy most.

The 2nd years also had the penalty of only receiving half the points for attacking 1st years, and the individual format would increase differentiation in the assessment.

Yeniel reviewed the other rules and came to a conclusion.

"It's practically saying to cooperate…"

Points are distributed based on contribution when capturing magical beasts.

Acting alone is less beneficial.

While solo action might seem advantageous, to score high in this assessment, one must cooperate with others.

Hunting magical beasts together may not yield high scores in the short term, but it's more efficient in the long run.

When hunting alone, it's inevitable to encounter other students.

In such cases, if the opponent has a team, you might face a one-against-many battle.

Defeat in such a situation essentially means the end.

No matter how many points you earn from beasts, you're just giving them away to others.

Considering all these aspects, forming a team early in the assessment is crucial for success.

It ensures safety.

If someone is alone by the mid-phase, they become prey for other teams.

From a team's perspective, the likelihood of accepting a lone individual into the team mid-way is low.

It's hard to tell if a person who didn't form a team early on betrayed their own team or has been hunting others.

Moreover, it might be more advantageous to capture an individual and gain points than to accept them into the team.

There were several strategies to secure the first place in the assessment.

However, these were not strategies just anyone could implement.

They required either special abilities or overwhelming power.

Such methods of victory were reserved for exceptional individuals, not something an ordinary person could achieve.

"If someone could do it…"

Two people immediately came to mind.

Rudy Astria and Evan.

They were exceptional cases.

Predicting their actions was nearly impossible.

Especially with Evan's current state, which was concerning.

The last time they spoke, he seemed as lost as a navigator without the North Star, clearly unsettled.

But there was nothing Yeniel could do about it.

Although she was concerned about Evan, Yeniel doubted that she could bring about a change.

A few words from Yeniel were unlikely to change Evan.

People don't change that easily.

Evan needed to experience and feel things himself before he could change.

"Setting Evan aside for now,"

Yeniel mused.

"What should I do?"

This time, even Yeniel was particularly focused on their performance.

McDowell, the principal, had instructed her to bring back good results, and Yeniel intended to follow through.

If possible, even aiming for the top spot.

"Interesting."

I was looking over the rules for the joint assessment.

"At least this time we don't have to fight each other! We just have to catch all the magical beasts!"

Luna said cheerfully beside me.

"It would be great if it were as Luna says…"

But that was unlikely.

Defeating people would be more beneficial for gaining points, but when considering overall rankings, reducing the number of competitors was more effective.

In fact, defeating people could be more advantageous for increasing points.

Towards the latter half, catching a weak player who has accumulated points from beasts could yield higher scores compared to fighting.

"Luna! Shall we decide where to meet up? Let's get together and catch a ton of beasts!"

"Should we?"

Still, I was relieved that I wouldn't have to fight people I knew.

There was no reason to confront Rie or Luna.

Both Rie and Luna were high-ranking, and I felt uncomfortable facing them.

With these rules, there was no need to fight Luna or Rie.

"Then let's tell Rie too! Decide on a place to meet! And tell other people!"

"Don't gather too many."

Luna was excitedly making plans, which made me anxious.

It felt like we were deciding who to take on a picnic…

"Of course! I'll only tell people we know!"

"Alright…"

Although I felt uneasy, I couldn't afford to worry about that.

I had other things to do.

"Firstly…"

I fiddled with the booklet distributed by the academy.

It was a beast encyclopedia.

It detailed what beasts would appear in the joint assessment, their characteristics, and how many points they were worth.

My task was to figure out which beasts would be the most efficient to catch.

Catching people might be good, but I didn't particularly want to do that.

Unless they were causing harm to me or others, I didn't want to attack people who were living peacefully.

"Well, I guess I should get going."

"Huh? Going where?"

"I can't keep standing in front of the bulletin board."

"Right…"

"I'm going to my room now to train and study the beasts."

As I said that, Luna made a peculiar face.

It was an expression mixed with dissatisfaction.

I looked at Luna, tilting my head in confusion.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well… Rudy?"

"Hmm?"

"Rie and you… everything's fine recently?"

Luna looked anxious, fidgeting with her fingers.

It was an obvious question.

I smiled at Luna.

"There were… some issues?"

"There were?"

Luna's eyes widened in surprise.

"What happened?"

"Just rolling around here and there with each other…"

I said in a playful tone.

"Rolled around?"

Luna mumbled quietly to herself in disbelief, "That's impossible," and "Now that I think about it, last time too…"

"Rudy…"

Seeing Luna's pout, I couldn't help but laugh playfully.

"Just kidding. We've been struggling a bit with magic-related stuff recently."

"Magic?"

"Yeah, Rie and I were discussing teleportation magic. We had some disagreements, so things got a bit heated."

Hearing this, Luna scrunched up her nose.

"Rudy!"

"Why are you asking such a question? You trying to slyly probe was the naughty part here."

Luna pouted her lips at my remark.

"So, nothing really happened then?"

"You know how busy we've been lately. What could have happened?"

"But, what was that about?"

"What?"

"When Rie asked you to hug her during the individual assessment. It seemed too natural. Almost like you've hugged her before…"

A twinge of guilt hit me at her words.

Is a woman's intuition really this scary?

I laughed awkwardly.

"Did it?"

"Hmm… never mind then."

Although Luna looked suspicious, she let it go.

"Anyway! I'm still trying to win you over, Rudy! You know that, right?"

"Win me over?"

That was something from when we went to the Railer territory.

It was only supposed to last until we returned from the Railer territory.

Honestly, I hadn't taken those half-joking words too seriously.

"It didn't end when we returned to the academy?"

"It's overtime. It didn't end back then."

So it's overtime until she succeeds?

Practically like an endless rain dance until it rains.

But it didn't really matter to me.

It wasn't uncomfortable, and her antics were actually amusing.

"Alright, give it your best shot."

"But! If you start liking me too much, you have to tell me, okay?"

I laughed at her silly statement.

"Got it. You should head back and train too."

"Okay! See you tomorrow!"

I waved at Luna as I headed to the dormitory.

Entering my room, I opened the booklet containing the names of the beasts.

I had skimmed through the booklet as soon as I received it.

There were beasts I recognized from our Magical Beast Studies class and some I had never seen before.

I flipped through the book to its last section.

The beast listed at the end.

Beside its name, several red warning notes were written.

"It feels like this one will just pop up near the end…"

It was typical for a creature with such warnings to make an appearance.

I smiled.

"This is going to be interesting."

The name of the beast at the very end of the book.

It was the Red Dragon Hatchling.

So, there were two goals for the joint practical.

The highest scorers in both categories.

Catching the Red Dragon Hatchling among the beasts.

And catching Evan among the students.

That was my plan.

CHAPTER 184
DIRECTION (4)

Dozens of students were standing in the auditorium, huddled together and chatting.

As each name was called, one by one, they left the auditorium.

"Let's meet there then."

"Okay! You have to come there at least on the second night!"

"The seniors might just leave, but not us."

"If we can't make it, we can't. Anyway, we'll have to gather on the third day whether we like it or not."

Like the others, we were gathered and chatting.

Starting with Luna and Rie, then Kuhn and Emily, and Locke.

And then.

"When will I ever be invited to such a grand gathering?"

"You could make it if you try, Riku. Stop playing around."

Ena and Riku too.

It seemed like everyone we knew was invited.

I wondered if we had gathered too many people, but based on what we learned about the Red Dragon, it seemed we wouldn't have too many, only perhaps too few.

The Red Dragon was not an opponent to be taken lightly.

It would take all of us, including Astina, to stand a chance.

Even then, it wasn't a guarantee of victory.

Regardless of being a Hatchling… the offspring of a Red Dragon, its majesty was undiminished.

A dragon's skin can deflect all magic and blades, and the breath it emits can burn down mountains.

Even if it's just a Hatchling, it could still unleash half of that power.

But that didn't matter much.

If you know your enemy and yourself, you will never be defeated.

I had thought about myself and those around me, and diligently researched the dragon.

I had even devised a plan.

I wasn't sure how it would turn out, but it was a plan with a good chance of success.

I smiled and looked around.

Then I noticed someone who was usually there was missing.

"By the way, isn’t Yuni participating?"

It was unlikely that Luna hadn’t asked Yuni.

Yet, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Ah, Yuni said she'd observe the situation and decide. She said it's hard to give a sure answer."

Was it because I was part of this group?

I thought that shouldn't matter.

After all, we were competing based on our academic year and rank.

I turned to look at Rie.

"Is Yuni not feeling well…?"

"She seems fine. And she wouldn't get nervous over something like this. It’s an event that lasts for days without an audience."

Rie shrugged her shoulders.

Indeed, if she wasn't feeling well, she'd be more inclined to join, having supportive people around her.

Then what was the reason?

Just then, the announcer’s voice rang out.

"Yuni Von Ristonia, please board the carriage."

"How can I achieve first place?"

Yuni had pondered this deeply.

Her skills were certainly exceptional.

Armed with the theories learned in the lab and the lightning magic taught by Gracie, she felt confident against any first-year student.

However, this assessment was such that even with outstanding skills, one might not secure the top spot.

It required the support of fellow students and a bit of luck.

Among the first-years, she was strong, but if the second-years were included, she would be in the upper-middle tier.

If a powerful second-year targeted Yuni, she would lose.

Not only would she miss the top ranks, but she could also plummet to the very

bottom.

In such a case, perhaps it would be better to heed Luna's advice.

That might be a more stable approach.

However, Yuni was not satisfied with this.

In Rudy's group were Kuhn and Emily.

Kuhn, a talent ranking third among the first-years.

If she was in the same team, she might be overshadowed by Kuhn.

To secure the top spot, she had to take a slightly different, albeit riskier, approach.

"Even if I join Luna's group later… I can’t start off with them from the beginning."

She needed to earn as many points as possible on her own.

That was the only way to score higher than Kuhn or Diark.

"Now the question is, what should I do from here?"

Yuni gazed up at the sky.

She was in a forest dense with trees.

Even though it was autumn, many trees were still green, interspersed occasionally with trees shedding their autumn leaves.

The scent of fallen leaves and earth enveloped her.

Yuni had arrived at the mountain where the joint assessment was to take place.

Then, a voice from behind spoke.

"Yuni, you may proceed directly to the assessment."

"Ah, yes… I mean, understood."

Yuni initially responded informally before quickly correcting herself.

The staff member smiled at Yuni's cute mistake and boarded the carriage they had arrived in.

Then, the carriage traveled to the mountain.

"How did they make a path through the mountain?"

Yuni looked in wonder at the trail leading up to the mountainside.

Trees had been cut to create a neat pathway.

"This isn't the time to worry about that."

Yuni shook her head.

The first-years had arrived at the mountain earlier than the second-years.

Limited carriages and the inability to teleport all students to the mountain at once meant that the disadvantaged first-years started the evaluation first.

With no second-years around, she had to earn as many points as possible.

Rustle—

At that moment, a sound came from the bushes in front of Yuni.

She quickly turned her head towards the sound.

"A magical beast?"

Yuni watched the bushes warily, a look of surprise on her face.

Then, a small creature burst through the undergrowth.

“…A rabbit?"

A rabbit with fluffy fur appeared.

Yuni gazed impassively at the rabbit.

Then, she manipulated her mana.

Crackle—

Static electricity formed around her head.

"There shouldn't be a rabbit like this in such a place."

The rabbit was actually a 'White Rabbit,' a type of magical beast.

It was clearly listed in the Bestiary.

This mountain was home to numerous magical beasts.

A mere rabbit couldn’t survive here.

The White Rabbit’s eyes turned red.

Its fur bristled, revealing sharp teeth and claws.

“Grrrr…”

“Spark.”

Yuni used her magic, and small electric currents shot out from her hand.

“Squeak!”

The White Rabbit dodged Yuni's magic by rolling away.

Seizing the opportunity created by the White Rabbit's dodge, Yuni used another spell.

"Fire Ball."

“Eek!”

The Fire Ball hit the White Rabbit.

Small flames clung to its body, and it rolled on the ground.

However, it didn't collapse completely.

Despite being hit by the Fire Ball, the White Rabbit got back up.

"Squeal…! Squeak!!!"

But it didn't continue the fight.

Making strange noises, the White Rabbit quickly began to flee.

'Did I use too weak a spell?'

Choosing the Fire Ball was a decision to conserve mana, considering the 3-day duration in the mountains.

However, it was Yuni's mistake to allow it to escape.

'Should I chase it?'

Each of these magical creatures represented points, so she needed to defeat them.

Yuni moved to chase the fleeing White Rabbit.

But she didn't need to go far.

Rustle—

"…?"

She had just started chasing when she heard noises from the surrounding bushes.

Rustle— Rustle— Rustle—

It wasn't just one or two.

White rabbits with white fur started to emerge from the bushes.

That's when Yuni realized.

White Rabbit: Not very strong individually but highly reproductive.

Hunts in groups.

Requires caution when faced alone.

Those were the words from the Bestiary.

Dozens of White Rabbits surrounded Yuni.

“Grrr… Grrr…”

The White Rabbits made strange noises, as if mocking Yuni.

“…Hmm.”

Yuni looked around nonchalantly and then smirked.

“Missing one score brought many more at once? Is this the ‘blessing in disguise’ Rudy talked about?”

Yuni waved her hand in the air.

Strong static electricity formed around her, gathering in her hand.

With a satisfied smile, Yuni said,

“Chain Lightning.”

After arriving at the mountain, I looked around.

Surprisingly, the surroundings were quiet.

Unusually quiet.

Firstly, I scanned the area.

I needed to decide quickly where to move.

This evaluation was to last for three days and two nights.

During this time, I would have to camp in the mountains.

And that too, under the threat of enemies lurking around…

Surely there were those planning to earn points through surprise attacks.

For some, it was more advantageous to face people than magical beasts.

Take Yeniel, for example.

Having lived the life of an assassin, Yeniel would likely opt for such a tactic.

Therefore, finding a base was essential.

A place where I could easily protect myself at night.

A cave would be good, or even an open area.

I was confident in a fair fight, no matter the opponent.

“More importantly…”

I looked up at the trees around me.

I could feel manas moving above the trees.

Were the instructors monitoring?

I didn't notice it in my first year, but lately, I've become more sensitive to mana.

It made sense, considering even a Red Dragon Hatchling could appear.

If even one student were to lose their life, it would cause an uproar…

Lost in these thoughts, I was about to move when I heard it.

“…Rudy Astria.”

I heard my name being called.

A man appeared before me.

“…Who are you?”

I looked puzzled at the unfamiliar man.

It was absurd that someone I didn’t know was calling my name as if waiting for me.

“I’m Rockefeller, the eldest son of the Count of Tronia!”

The man proudly declared his lineage.

But even with his declaration, I didn’t recognize him.

How could I remember every student in the Academy?

I had trouble remembering the names of those helping the student council.

“So what? Is this some kind of introduction?”

I frowned and spoke.

“Well… Ah…! Fine, let's assume that.”

Rockefeller, as he introduced himself, extended his hand toward me.

“Join our team, Rudy Astria.”

“…What?”

“You know it’s advantageous to form teams with people nearby, right?”

Hearing this, I understood the situation.

I guessed why it had been so quiet around.

“If I don’t join your team?”

Rockefeller smiled as if he had anticipated my response.

“Then we’ll have to take your points.”

As he spoke, I felt mana around us.

Some of the manas I had felt earlier flickered.

It seemed odd that there was so much mana, but it appeared that many were lying in ambush.

“Being the second-ranked in the individual evaluation… your points must be quite valuable.”

“Ah…”

They were waiting where the carriages dropped us off, planning to ambush anyone who wouldn’t join their team.

The carriage route into the mountain was limited.

So, waiting at that spot meant they could ambush students without a team.

They had found a loophole in the rules.

It was ridiculous.

"Hey, I have a question."

“…What?"

"What were you thinking, waiting until the last to be here? You knew who would be on the last carriage, didn't you?"

The last to leave the Academy.

That included me, Evan, Rie, and others among the top second-year students.

"Do you really think you stand a chance?"

If it were a battle among the top-ranked students, maybe.

But not a single one of us would fall to these small fry.

"Instead of scheming like this, you should have hunted more magical beasts."

I manipulated my mana.

"Or, you should have ambushed without talking."

As I said this, the guy started to backpedal.

Then he shouted.

"Everybody, attack!"

"Too late, idiot."

I channeled mana into my feet and stomped on the ground.

In an instant, I reached Rockefeller.

"Starting with you, then?"

I smiled and raised my hand.

The mana stone on my glove twinkled.

CHAPTER 185
DIRECTION (5)

"Sigh…”

I took a moment to catch my breath and looked around.

About a dozen people lay defeated on the ground.

Had I started off too leniently?

More attacked me than I had anticipated.

Some of them were quite skilled.

I tried to conserve my strength as much as possible.

It was early in the assessment, so I couldn't afford to use too much power.

As a result, small wounds appeared on my arms and legs.

That was the cost of minimizing mana use.

'I'm not sure if this is an advantage… ' ' These injuries wouldn't hinder my fighting, though.

There was no problem moving my arms or legs, and I wasn't bleeding much.

The real issue was something else.

I had spent too much time dealing with them.

Although I had earned a decent score, the sun was beginning to set.

Without a proper team and staying up all night in this situation, my mana, physical, and mental strength would surely not recover, a definite problem for tomorrow.

To avoid impairing my ability in tomorrow's battle, I needed to quickly establish a base.

'The problem is where to find such a place… '

Without further delay, I started moving.

'My clothes are all dirty now.'

Yuni frowned and dusted off her clothes.

They were grimy from extensive use of magic.

"Ouch!"

Pain struck while she was dusting, causing her to yelp.

She hadn't noticed during the fight, but there was a wound on her left forearm.

It wasn't bleeding profusely, so she left it as it was for now.

'More than that, it's so uncomfortable.'

Sweat had soaked her back from the intense movement.

After some thought, Yuni reached a decision.

'Maybe I should look for a stream?'

Having earned a substantial score, she shifted her focus to survival.

She needed to find food and water.

The best places for that were valleys or streams.

As a user of lightning magic, Yuni could easily secure food with a single spell at a stream.

Besides, she could also take the chance to wash up, making the stream an ideal destination.

Yuni slowly started walking.

'If things keep going like this, it'll be pretty good.'

But she couldn't let her guard down.

The nature of this assessment allowed for comebacks in the latter half.

If one aimed for the top spot and accumulated enough points, even a large gap could be overturned.

Or, the scores of those in lower ranks could combine to surpass the first place.

Given the mountain's vast size and the risks involved in fighting, people would likely avoid each other, but she couldn't completely rule out encounters.

'I need a big enough lead so that even if the lower ranks all start grouping, it won't matter.'

This was why Yuni had said she wouldn't join any groups.

Being in a group would limit the increase in points.

And with Rudy's group having strong members, it was disadvantageous for Yuni to be in a group, especially when capturing magical beasts, as points were awarded based on contribution.

While she pondered this, she gradually heard the sound of running water.

She had already checked the map of the mountain, so finding key locations like a valley wasn't difficult.

Pushing through the bushes towards the valley, she noticed something.

"Hmm?"

There was a figure by the stream.

A woman was bent over, drinking water.

'An enemy?'

There was no one else around.

That meant she was alone.

She didn't seem alert, probably not having noticed Yuni yet.

Yuni began to channel her mana.

"Ah…"

Just then, the woman finished drinking and straightened up.

Yuni stopped channeling her mana and spoke out.

"…Emily?"

"Huh?"

It was Emily, Kuhn's girlfriend.

Startled by the sudden noise, Emily looked in Yuni's direction.

"It's Yuni!"

Emily got up excitedly, a smile on her face.

Yuni lowered her hand, which was ready to cast a spell, and opened her mouth to speak.

"Drinking water so carelessly, what if someone attacked you?"

"Ah… I was just really thirsty and drank in a hurry."

Emily smiled awkwardly.

They had been together in Gracie's lab, but they weren't particularly close.

Yuni, by nature, didn't approach people she wasn't interested in.

Emily was aware of this.

Yet, Yuni's words seemed almost concerned, which puzzled Emily a bit.

Yuni emerged from the bushes.

"Oh? Yuni, did you come from a fight?"

Emily's eyes widened upon seeing Yuni's disheveled clothes.

"Yeah, ran into a pack of rabbits."

Emily hurried over to Yuni.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

She began inspecting Yuni's body for injuries.

"Ah."

Emily suddenly realized her actions might be too forward.

Normally, she took care of her friends, and in this unfamiliar environment, seeing Yuni brought relief, making her to act as she usually did with her friends.

"Sorry, sorry."

Emily stopped and stepped back.

"Why are you apologizing?"

Yuni tilted her head, puzzled by Emily's behavior.

"Well, it's just that…"

Emily gestured awkwardly with her hands.

She didn't want to seem too friendly suddenly, fearing it might be perceived as an act

for the assessment.

Unaware of Emily's thoughts, Yuni raised her arm, revealing a blood-stained sleeve on her forearm.

"I got hurt here."

"Oh…?"

"You know healing magic, right?"

Emily was surprised that Yuni, who had barely remembered her name and face after a week in the lab, knew she could use healing magic.

"Okay, got it."

Emily approached Yuni cautiously and examined the wound.

It wasn't too severe, but if left untreated, it could scar.

"Just a moment…"

Emily opened her bag, strapped around her waist.

"I can't heal it completely, but I'll make sure it doesn't get worse."

She took out antiseptic and a white cloth.

Then, she led Yuni to the stream.

"Let's wash it with water first."

To remove any dirt or debris, they rinsed the wound with water before Emily sprinkled some antiseptic on the cloth.

"This might sting a bit."

"Ow…!"

As Emily applied the cloth to the wound, Yuni grimaced.

After cleaning the wound, Emily began to channel her mana.

Mana gathered in her hands and she placed them over Yuni's injury.

Yuni relaxed her face, feeling the warmth of Emily's mana.

"Healing."

A greenish glow circled around Emily's hands.

The wound that hadn't properly clotted began to heal gradually.

While it didn't completely disappear, the throbbing pain subsided.

Yuni looked at her wound curiously and moved her arm around.

"It doesn't hurt?"

"Yeah, for now I've only managed to stop the bleeding and alleviate the pain. I'm still not skilled enough to completely heal it…"

"How do you do it?"

"Huh?"

Yuni looked at her with curious eyes.

Emily, a bit flustered, slowly began to explain.

"Well… healing magic works through the control of mana… You can do it to…"

"Really?"

Yuni nodded in satisfaction.

"Thanks, really."

"Oh, no need to thank me! That's what friends are for."

Yuni, without much reaction, walked towards the stream and bent down to drink

some water.

Emily watched her, somewhat baffled.

It was their first time being together like this, and it felt awkward yet unexpectedly kind compared to their usual interactions.

After drinking, Yuni took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her mouth.

"By the way, where's Kuhn?"

"Huh? Kuhn?"

"You're always with Kuhn, right?"

"Oh… I haven't met him yet today. I was planning to stay low and then quickly head towards the summit."

"The summit?"

Yuni put the handkerchief back into her pocket.

"Yeah. We planned to meet with Luna and Rie at the 'Big Boss Rock.' You know, that huge rock at the top."

"'Big Boss Rock?'"

"Yeah, that big rock up there at the peak is called 'Big Boss Rock.' That's where we decided to meet."

Yuni frowned as she looked at the rock Emily was pointing to.

It was the same rock she had used to orient herself when she arrived here.

"Such a name…"

Yuni commented and then stood up.

"Then let's stick together."

"Huh? You mean you'll come with me?"

Emily recalled what Luna had said.

Yuni had declined the invitation to join them, saying she preferred not to come.

"So you've changed your mind?"

"No, I'm not going to join. It's just that it's dangerous at night, so let's stick together."

Emily's eyes widened at Yuni's proposal.

"You mean you'll protect me?"

At Emily's words, Yuni wrinkled her nose.

"No, it's just more efficient if we're together."

Emily smiled at Yuni's response.

Being with someone like Yuni would be better than being alone.

Emily wasn't fast or particularly strong in combat, so it was a nice offer.

"Alright, then shall we look for a place to stay?"

Emily spoke with a voice full of cheer.

Yuni and Emily managed to find a shelter before sunset, settling in a small cave near the valley.

As the twilight set in, Yuni placed the fish she had caught on the ground.

"Here, I've brought some fish."

"Thanks, Yuni! I've also started a fire."

Emily had gathered fallen leaves from around and made a small campfire near the

cave, which was quite compact.

Yuni looked at the fire, then around them, with a puzzled expression.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just that I've been hearing sounds of a fight since a while ago."

"Sounds of a fight?"

Indeed, there had been faint noises, but they seemed distant, so Emily hadn't paid much attention.

"It sounds like it's getting closer."

"Should we put out the fire?"

Crack—

Suddenly, a loud crashing sound echoed nearby, like a tree breaking.

It was quite close.

Thud—

"Aaah…!"

A scream followed.

"What's that?"

Yuni quickly gestured with her hand, signaling to stay still.

'What's happening?'

She glanced back at the fire.

"We should run."

Though leaving their shelter felt regrettable, it felt like the right decision.

"The fire…?"

"Leave it…"

Thud— Thud—

The sound of heavy footsteps approached rapidly, making a thunderous noise.

Then.

Bang—

Two figures burst out from between the valley and the forest, one seemingly chasing the other with a sword.

"Ah…"

Bang—!

The pursued figure slammed against the valley wall, kicking up a cloud of dust.

The other landed gracefully in the valley.

Yuni and Emily watched the scene in shock.

The identity of the person who hit the wall was obscured by dust, but the other's face was clear.

A man with black hair, wielding a sword, surrounded by a greenish glow.

Instantly, Yuni and Emily recognized him.

"Evan…"

The person standing boldly, having pushed the other away, was none other than the top student of the second year.

It was Evan.

CHAPTER 186
DIRECTION (6)

It felt hollow.

His eyes were focused, yet there was an emptiness within.

Yuni clenched her teeth hard.

'If I fight, I lose.'

It was an obvious fact.

Even in perfect condition, defeating Evan was impossible.

She pondered if it might be possible to escape by using up all her mana.

"Yuni Von Ristonia… Emily… is it?"

Evan looked at the two and spoke.

Emily's eyes widened, surprised that Evan knew her name.

"How…”

She wasn't a celebrity at the academy, yet he knew her name.

It would have been one thing if he had just said her name, but his hollow eyes while speaking it sent chills down her spine.

"Ugh…”

Just then, a person who had been smashed against the valley wall began to rise.

Extracting himself from the embedded wall, he slowly walked out.

It was Diark.

With a grimace, blood trickled down from his head.

Diark, wiping the blood from his forehead, looked towards Yuni.

"Yuni… right?"

"Yes."

Yuni looked back at Diark.

His clothes were torn, and there was a large sword wound on his stomach.

In contrast, Evan was without a single scratch.

Her fleeting hope of possibly escaping was diminishing.

Even after such a fierce fight, Diark hadn't managed to inflict even a scratch on Evan.

Yuni thought about how to escape this situation.

But Evan gave no opportunity.

He raised his sword, and green lights from the surrounding trees began to converge.

Yuni quickly made a decision.

"Emily, heal Diark!"

"What? Uh?"

Crack—

Yuni activated her mana.

With Diark and Emily injured, they stood no chance against Evan.

There was no way to create an opportunity to escape.

Yet, she confronted Evan.

"Spark!"

Yuni launched several small currents at Evan.

"No!"

Diark shouted at that moment.

"If you use magic directly…”

Yuni didn't respond and continued her magic, charging towards Evan.

Her plan was to attack first, as electric magic was not good defensively.

"Hmm…”

Evan deflected the approaching currents with his sword.

'Done… '

Yuni inwardly smiled.

He couldn't deflect the current with his sword.

If the current touched the sword, it would travel through it, paralyzing him.

Yuni maneuvered her mana as she watched.

But Evan was not so easily overcome.

After deflecting Yuni's Spark, he quickly charged towards her.

"Ah…?"

He wasn't paralyzed.

Evan's characteristic.

Magic nullification.

A skill that nullified all magic.

Yuni was unaware of Evan's ability.

She didn't know that Evan's sword could not just block mana but completely obliterate it.

As Evan approached Yuni, he lifted his leg.

"Weak."

His raised leg glowed green as he struck Yuni squarely in the abdomen.

"Ugh…!"

Bang!!!

Yuni was kicked away by Evan, flying off into the distance.

"Yu, Yuni!!!"

Emily cried out in alarm.

Diark then grabbed Emily's wrist.

"Focus on healing! I need to step in."

"Ah… ugh… Healing!!!"

Emily nodded at Diark's words and cast her spell.

"Argh…"

Yuni, clutching the area where she was hit, struggled to her feet.

"It hurts…"

Yuni, who had lived a sheltered life, had never experienced such a powerful attack.

It was an excruciating pain that brought tears to her eyes.

Still, she staggered to her feet.

Being kicked was better than being stabbed.

If she had been stabbed by the sword, she wouldn't have been able to get up again.

Yuni clenched her teeth and stood up.

'I can't fall here.'

Despite the pain, she had to move.

She had to respond to her opponent.

It was a desperate situation, and it hurt terribly, but she endured and stood up.

She couldn't just collapse here in vain.

"Yuni Von Ristonia."

Then Diark spoke.

His expression was better than before, probably due to Emily's healing.

Drawing his sword, Diark stepped forward.

"I'll take the front, you follow up with an attack."

There was no talk of forming a team or anything else.

It was obvious that they had to join forces to stand against Evan.

Yuni took a deep breath and looked ahead.

"Got it…"

Evan watched them indifferently.

Then he spoke.

"Next time, I'll make sure you won't get up."

Light leaked from the surrounding trees again.

Green lights gathered, brighter than before.

Crack—

The roots of the nearby trees burst out of the ground.

They moved as if alive.

The roots surrounded Yuni, Diark, and Emily, preventing their escape.

"Uh…"

Even in this desperate situation, Yuni moved her mana.

She tried her best despite the hopelessness.

Diark did the same.

"Here I go."

Diark, infusing his sword with sword aura, charged at Evan.

At the same time, Yuni also activated her mana.

"It won't work."

Evan charged back at Diark, who was rushing towards him.

"Ugh…"

Diark tried to stop his advance when Evan charged back at him.

However, Evan did not slow down.

The sword approached from the front.

Diark raised his own sword to block it.

Evan, seeing Diark raise his sword, swiftly withdrew his.

Then, he ducked and kicked Diark's lower body.

"Ugh…!"

The direct kick to his leg drained its strength, and Diark collapsed to the ground.

'The magic is still… '

Yuni's electric attack flew towards Evan.

Evan smoothly continued his motion, watching the approaching electricity.

He quickly raised his torso and brought his sword to meet the electricity.

“…What?"

As the electricity touched Evan's sword, it disappeared as if it had never existed, leaving no trace behind.

Confirming the magic had vanished, Evan lifted his foot and kicked Diark.

Diark was sent rolling across the ground by Evan's kick.

“…Is it over?"

Evan looked indifferently at Yuni, raising his sword.

The sight of Evan with his sword raised brought an overwhelming sense of intimidation.

Though she knew they wouldn't lose their lives in this assessment, the fear was great.

The thought of potentially losing her life filled her mind.

"Ah…”

Yuni tried to move her mana, but her body wouldn't respond.

Her face paled, and her legs trembled uncontrollably.

As Evan stared at her, he raised his sword high.

'No, this can't be happening.'

The moment that sword comes down…

It's the end.

Right here.

Just as Yuni was paralyzed with despair,

"Hey."

A voice suddenly called out.

It was a familiar voice.

"…?"

Startled by the unexpected voice, Evan stopped his downward strike and turned to the side.

A figure emerged from beside them.

"What are you doing?"

The voice was filled with anger.

A man emerged from the debris of the destroyed trees, walking towards Evan.

"Ha…!"

Evan looked at the man with a mix of wonder and annoyance.

There seemed to be a sense of welcome, mixed with rising anger.

Yuni looked at the suddenly appearing man.

"Se, senior?"

"That's enough of bullying these kids. Didn't I make a rule about that? What are you doing?"

The man, running his hand through his hair, spoke with an air of irritation.

It was Rudy Astria.

"Ha… Haha… Rudy Astria!"

Evan, ignoring Yuni and Diark, pointed his sword at Rudy.

"I've been looking for you."

Evan said, seemingly pleased.

Rudy looked at him with a disbelieving expression.

"If you were looking for me, why involve the others?"

Evan paid no heed to Rudy's words and took a fighting stance.

But Rudy just looked at Evan with disdain, making no move to engage.

"Ru, Rudy."

Yuni spoke, surprised by Rudy's nonchalant attitude.

Then Rudy slightly turned his head and raised his hand slightly.

It was a gesture that seemed to say, 'Don't move.'

"What, what's…?"

"Yuni."

Emily, who was behind her, grabbed Yuni.

Emily brought her index finger to her lips and whispered softly.

"Just do as the senior says…"

"Huh?"

"Look at Rudy."

Following Emily's direction, Yuni saw that Rudy was covered in wounds.

He looked as if he had already been in a fight.

"We can't fight because he's protecting us…"

Yuni muttered to herself.

Then, she thought.

So, he already knew about this situation and came prepared?

What's his plan?

Can he really win with those injuries?

Against such an opponent?

Yuni's mind was a whirl of thoughts.

Seeing Yuni stop her actions, Rudy smiled and looked at Evan.

"So, you found me? Why aren't you attacking?"

"Rudy… Astria!!!"

Evan, with his sword glowing in a green light, charged at Rudy.

Rudy saw Evan rushing towards him and jumped back a considerable distance.

Evan's sword, followed by swirling green lights, chased after Rudy.

And it wasn't just that.

The trees near Rudy started moving, attempting to grab him.

"That's right, come out like this."

Rudy spoke as if he was leisurely, but his expression was strained.

Rudy didn't confront Evan head-on and kept backing away.

Gradually retreating into the forest, he started to disappear from Yuni's sight.

"Yuni, now's the time!"

Emily grabbed Yuni's hand.

"We have to run. Now that Rudy has drawn his attention…"

"…"

Yuni bit her teeth and looked in the direction where Rudy had disappeared.

Then, she pushed Emily's hand away.

"…Yuni?"

"I'm going to follow them."

"Follow them? Yuni, Rudy intentionally distanced himself… If we go now, we'll just be a hindrance…"

"No, there might be something I can do to help."

Yuni started walking forward.

Despite feeling a tremendous sense of helplessness when facing Evan.

Despite being wrapped in fear.

She had to move.

Rudy was risking his injured self to save them.

'If Rudy senior falls back now… '

Then…

"Emily, take him and run."

Yuni pointed at Diark, who was lying on the ground.

"Yu, Yuni!"

Ignoring Emily's call, Yuni, with trembling legs, started running towards the direction Rudy had disappeared into.

CHAPTER 187
DIRECTION (7)

Evan's eyes blazed with fury at the sight of Rudy.

Rudy had appeared out of nowhere, provoking Evan, and now seemed to be taunting him as he fled.

Rudy continuously evaded without even trading blows, always retreating.

Despite the multitude of tree trunks targeting him, Rudy nimbly dodged them, moving swiftly in every direction.

It appeared as though Evan could catch him, but Rudy always managed to escape by a hair's breadth.

This frustrating cycle of near-captures and escapes gradually fueled Evan's anger.

Rational thought gave way to rage.

"Damn it, Rudy Astria… Fight me fair and square!"

Rudy turned towards Evan upon hearing these words, his lips curling in a mocking sneer.

"Rudy Astria!!!"

Evan gritted his teeth in frustration.

He exerted more mana to manipulate the trees, but Rudy, unyielding, broke through the branches and evaded capture.

Evan realized something as he watched Rudy's retreating figure.

'Just chasing him won't end this.'

He shifted his mana, aiming to immobilize Rudy.

The surrounding trees responded to Evan's mana.

'Time for a grand move… targeting the legs.'

Green light radiated from the trees, converging on Evan's sword.

This was Evan's nature magic*, a spell that harnessed the power of nearby trees as a substitute for mana.

He planned to use a spell of immense scale to target Rudy's legs.

As the mana gathered from the trees, a wind blew.

"Huh?"

A sudden breeze, unexpected in the densely wooded mountain.

Even if there was wind, it would only lightly affect the nearby trees.

It was an unnatural wind.

"What's this?"

He doubted Rudy Astria would have cast a spell while fleeing.

Just to be sure, Evan extended his sword into the wind.

If it were magic, his sword should have dissipated it.

But the wind blowing towards Evan persisted.

"It's not magic?"

The wind felt too purposeful to be a natural occurrence, especially since it was blowing solely towards him.

Evan's brow furrowed in confusion.

Rudy was growing more distant, and a strange phenomenon was unfolding before him.

Now wasn't the time to ponder this peculiar breeze.

Evan refocused, attempting to draw energy from the surrounding trees once more.

As the green lights converged towards him, a small red light approached from afar.

It wasn't the green light Evan was gathering, but a red one, tiny in size and moving towards him with an unnatural, undulating motion.

Evan suddenly realized something.

The breeze that kept blowing towards him was carrying a flickering light.

He instinctively knew he shouldn't let this light come closer.

But it was too tiny to interact with using his sword.

As he pondered alone, the undulating red light grew increasingly brighter.

Evan's eyes widened at the sight.

It's going to explode.

He knew it instantly.

He stopped his actions and lifted his sword to shield himself.

The small light intensified in color, its form blurring.

And then, in an instant…

Boom!

It expanded rapidly and exploded.

Strong winds and flames erupted.

"Argh…"

Evan managed to control the extent of the explosion with his sword, a fortunate outcome.

However, the wind caused by the explosion shattered rocks and trees, sending fragments flying.

These fragments pierced Evan's body.

"Argh…"

Evan winced in pain as small stones embedded themselves all over his body.

But he couldn't afford to stay still.

Several more red lights, carried by the wind, approached him.

He had to avoid them.

They were too small to be sliced with his sword.

Moreover, even if he could control the flames of the explosion, he couldn't control the resultant wind.

'What kind of technique is this?'

Evan was bewildered.

He had always believed he could control anything with his sword.

But now, he couldn't block these with his sword.

Lack of experience.

Evan, having not encountered such situations before, couldn't understand what was happening.

He decided that he first needed to dodge the incoming wind.

As he prepared to move away from the wind…

Hiss…

The wind caught fire.

It was as if someone had lit the fuse of a bomb, the wind itself ignited.

"Ah."

And then.

Boom!!!

The wind resulted in a tremendous explosion.

A loud explosion resonated.

'Rudy…!'

Yuni realized it came from the direction Rudy had gone.

Her legs were weak, yet she pushed herself to run as fast as she could.

Finding Rudy and Evan was difficult; they were nowhere in sight.

Driven by an unwavering determination to find Rudy, Yuni ran forward, not even sure of her direction.

Her breath was heavy, almost suffocating her.

Her mind and body screamed for her to stop.

Her mind argued that going there wouldn't make any difference to Rudy, and her legs felt like they couldn't run any further.

Yet, she continued to move forward, regardless of her internal protests.

She had intended to surpass Rudy and prevent him from meeting Rie.

She had been so focused on defeating him.

However, Rudy had been supporting her since the individual assessment, even coming to her before the assessment to boost her morale.

Even now, his support was evident.

She realized how close she had been to failing, and her actions filled her with shame and regret.

She felt she owed it to Rudy to help him, especially now that he might be injured.

The thought of Rudy facing Evan while hurt, and possibly failing the assessment, was too much for her to bear.

'I have to do something, even if I fail… '

"Yuni."

She heard a voice just as she was determined to continue forward.

Someone called her, urging caution.

"Going any further is dangerous."

Yuni stopped and turned around, questioning.

“…Sister?"

It was Rie, holding a staff radiating bright light.

"Rudy is safe. Don't go any further,"

Rie said with a comforting smile.

Seeing her sister like this brought tears to Yuni's eyes.

"Why are you here…? Is Rudy in danger…?"

Yuni looked around, confused and concerned.

Rie gently placed a hand on Yuni's head.

"Rudy is drawing Evan away and will be back soon."

Yuni's face showed confusion at this explanation.

"So he lured him away… Was this planned?"

"It wasn't fully planned, more like improvised."

Yuni, tears in her eyes, looked puzzled.

Rie smiled at her reassuringly.

"Why are you about to cry? It’s nothing serious."

"No, it's just… Senior… I mean…”

Rie embraced Yuni warmly.

"It's okay."

“…I won't cry."

Yuni wiped away her tears and hugged Rie tightly.

"That was a close call."

I watched the forest burning from the explosion Rie had caused.

Such devastation would surely prevent Evan from continuing the fight.

I never planned to engage Evan in combat from the start.

I was originally searching for shelter when I heard a loud noise nearby and decided to investigate.

There, I witnessed Diark and Evan fighting.

I observed the battle to understand the situation.

It was a one-sided affair.

Diark tried to create openings to escape, but Evan aggressively pursued him, intent on killing him despite Diark’s evident reluctance and weaker strength.

Evan cornered Diark all the way to a nearby valley where Yuni and Emily were.

Evan even attacked Yuni and Emily, choosing them over more profitable monster hunting.

He wasn't interested in dialogue.

I almost rushed in when I saw this, but I paused to think carefully.

I needed a strategy to handle Evan.

In this environment, I was at a severe disadvantage.

The trees around us were a source of Evan's strength.

The forest, surrounded by trees, was the perfect battleground for Evan.

Facing Evan in my current state, having used much of my mana, was almost certainly impossible.

Defeat was inevitable.

My agility was insufficient for luring Evan away and then evading him.

I could move short distances quickly but lacked the stamina for sustained running.

I needed a different plan.

-What are you doing?

That's when Rie contacted me.

More precisely, it was Sylph, Rie’s spirit, who came to me.

Rie had also heard the commotion of Diark and Evan’s fight and had come to scout.

Together, we devised a plan.

I would lead Evan as far as possible while Rie would launch a powerful attack using her new ability.

Trusting her word, we put the plan into action.

'What kind of technique did she use?'

I pondered, looking at the flames.

An attack delivered without revealing herself, and it was more powerful than her usual.

I shrugged.

I could just ask her later.

I smiled.

Then, as I was about to move on, I looked back towards the burning area.

"Evan, we'll meet again later."

Now wasn't the right time to fight.

I needed to create the right environment.

Establish conditions where victory was possible.

I would return then.

CHAPTER 188
DIRECTION (8)

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Senior…”

I smiled and waved at Yuni and Rie.

Yuni frowned and looked at me, while Rie smiled.

Rie slowly walked towards me and checked my body.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

“Just a little? The injuries aren’t that serious.”

I couldn’t avoid all of Evan’s attacks due to low mana.

I had to escape while maintaining a safe distance, so some minor injuries were inevitable.

“Look…”

Then Yuni came up to me.

She looked at the injuries I had.

It was surprising to see Yuni, not Rie, acting like this.

“Sigh… Really…”

Yuni looked at me with annoyance.

“Why did you try to save me? It was just bad luck that I met a strong opponent. I should have just failed the assessment and that would be the end of it! It was just an

unavoidable accident… due to bad luck…”

Yuni looked upset, rambling as she gazed at my wounds.

I smiled at her.

“If it’s bad luck to meet such a guy, it’s good luck to meet me. Just think of it as good luck.”

“Are you an idiot? Senior, don’t you think about your own benefits?”

“…Just living to help others is good enough."

“…Huh?”

Rie tilted her head at Yuni’s behavior.

She squinted, as if something was strange.

Yuni’s behavior was odd, but there was no reason for such an expression.

It wasn’t strange to become emotional after a significant event.

I looked around, wondering if someone else was nearby.

But there was nothing in sight.

Why is she making that expression?

I asked Rie.

“Is something wrong?”

“…No. Nothing at all.”

In response to my question, Rie shook her head.

Yuni, looking confused, poked at me.

“Anyway, let’s go back to where we were. Emily is there, so you can get some

treatment."

"Oh, right. Emily knows healing magic."

That worked out well.

Getting treated by Emily and increasing our numbers would reduce the danger at night.

"Shall we move then?"

"Yes, Senior."

Rie kept looking at me with suspicion.

I looked back at her.

"Rie?"

"…Ah, yeah. Shall we go?"

…Why is she acting like that?

I was puzzled, but I started walking to join Emily and the others.

"Yuni…! Rudy…!"

Emily was hiding near the valley with Diark.

It seemed they hadn't gone far because Diark was injured.

"Emily, are you okay?"

Yuni slowly approached Emily.

"Yes, I'm fine thanks to Yuni's protection… But…"

Emily looked at Diark, who was sitting in front of her.

"Has senior arrived…"

Diark, wrapped in bandages, looked quite pitiful.

“Can you continue the assessment in this state…”

"We have to try as much as we can. We can't just give up."

It seemed Diark was satisfied just to have not been eliminated.

In fact, it wouldn't have been surprising if he had been eliminated after being attacked by Evan earlier.

Evan's strikes could be fatal for first-year students.

Still, Diark had managed to hold on, likely because he was not just a wizard but a magic swordsman with physical enhancements.

“Yes, you’ve had a tough time…”

I patted Diark’s shoulder a few times.

This guy was also aiming for the top rank among the first-year students.

He must be heartbroken about this unlucky situation.

Yet, seeing his determined demeanor made me want to support him.

“Shall we prepare to spend the night?”

I couldn’t do much to help, but I thought of creating a comfortable environment for them.

The first to respond to my suggestion was Yuni.

“I’ll go to the stream. I can quickly catch something like fish.”

“Oh, would you do that?”

I was a bit surprised to see Yuni being so proactive, but I didn’t stop her since she volunteered.

“Then shall we also get ready?”

We needed to make a space to sleep in and make space for a bonfire.

It would be too uncomfortable to sleep on the bare ground without anything.

We needed to gather leaves or something to make a bed-like structure.

“Rudy, come with me. Emily should stay and take care of Diark.”

“No, it’s okay! You can go without me. Take Emily with you…”

Diark quickly responded to Rie’s suggestion.

Rie looked at Diark with cold eyes.

“Is that so?”

Diark sensed the threat and gently laid down.

He lay down gently, but his movements were swift and concise.

Then he suddenly groaned.

“Ah, ah… I suddenly feel unwell… I need to lie down…”

“Is that so? Emily? Could you take care of Diark?”

“…Yes.”

Diark and Emily quickly reacted to Rie's words.

It was curious that they reacted like that without Rie having to do much.

They were quick-witted, indeed.

“Rudy? Shall we go?”

Rie spoke to me with a smile in her eyes.

Seeing Rie like that, I sighed.

“Don’t be too hard on the kids…”

“Hm? What’s wrong? Is something the matter?”

Rie gave a sly smile and tilted her head, pretending to be clueless.

Since I wasn't really asking the kids to do anything but rather telling them to rest…

“It’s nothing. Shall we go?”

“Sure!”

Rie left the shelter with a bright face.

We had to go a bit away from our campsite to gather short branches and leaves.

As we walked away from the shelter, Rie spoke.

“It’s getting darker.”

“Yes, it is. Let’s gather quickly and return.”

After hearing my response, Rie sighed and spoke again.

“In a forest with no one around… and with the weather turning dark… it feels a bit cold and eerie.”

“…Right. Let’s gather quickly…”

Before I could repeat my earlier response, Rie quickly turned her head.

“That’s not what I’m hoping for.”

It was cold, dark, and spooky, so we should hurry back and light a bonfire, right?

“So, what do you want?”

“Sigh, you can be so clueless.”

Rie sighed and reached out her hand to me.

“Give me your hand.”

“What?”

“Hold my hand.”

Rie extended her hand towards me confidently.

I stared at her and then firmly said,

“No.”

I felt like I had been pushed around too much by Rie lately.

I couldn’t just keep doing everything she asked; it would spoil her.

Rie's eyes widened at my firm refusal.

“…You mean no?”

She stepped back as if she couldn’t believe it, her face full of disappointment.

“Why not…”

Gone was her confident demeanor, replaced with a pitiful look as she gazed up at me.

“Ugh…”

Seeing the usually assertive Rie with such an expression weakened my resolve.

How could anyone remain unaffected when someone as attractive as Rie looks up with such an expression?

I pressed my lips together and turned my head away.

I mustn't give in here.

This was just a trick of Rie's.

I turned my head sharply.

“Let’s… gather some branches…”

I resisted well…

Just as I was about to turn and walk away,

Rie grabbed my sleeve.

She looked up slightly with a sad expression.

“Hold it…”

She repeated.

“…”

My resolve wasn’t that strong.

“♬～♪.”

Rie hummed a tune while holding my hand.

One should know when to refuse, but…

How can I say no when she makes such a face and asks?

So, I ended up holding Rie’s hand as we went to collect branches.

However, there was a problem.

To pick up branches, I needed to let go of her hand.

It was obvious that Rie wouldn’t just let it be if I simply released her hand.

I glanced at Rie, with the branches right in front of me.

“We can’t pick up the wood if we keep holding hands…”

I hinted subtly to Rie.

But Rie was unfazed.

“Sylph.”

She immediately summoned a spirit to gather the surrounding leaves and branches.

In no time, Sylph had collected all the leaves and was holding them.

I thought we didn’t need to come out here if she was going to do this, but it was clear her aim was just to be alone with me, so I didn’t say it out loud.

But Rie overlooked one thing.

“Now that we’ve gathered everything, shall we go back?”

“…!”

After all, our purpose of coming out was to collect leaves and branches.

Now that we had everything, there was no reason to stay outside any longer.

“…The breeze is nice. Why don’t we walk around a bit more?”

“It’s dangerous outside. What if we encounter other people or beasts?”

“With you and me here, what’s there to worry about?”

Rie spoke confidently, but I couldn’t spoil her any further.

“No. It’d be a headache if we run into a strong beast. Let’s go back and rest. Tomorrow is going to be very busy.”

I didn't mention Sylph since it didn't use much mana, but we needed to conserve as much mana as possible.

We have a busy schedule starting from tomorrow morning so we need to conserve both mana and physical strength.

At my words, Rie tilted her head.

“What’s happening tomorrow?”

“Yes, there’s a slight change in the plan. I’m moving some things forward.”

“Moving things forward?”

My plan.

A plan known to Rie, Luna, and everyone.

“Tomorrow, we’re going to hunt the Red Dragon Hatchling.”

CHAPTER 189
DIRECTION (9)

The dragon is known to be the strongest among magical beasts, inhabiting mountains, seas, and grasslands without preference, making nests and living there.

It manages the beasts around its nest to protect it and gather food.

Although it may seem no different from other beasts, the dragon differs significantly—it can communicate with humans.

Possessing superior intelligence and rationality compared to other beasts, dragons, however, cannot coexist with humans.

Despite being able to communicate, they cannot engage in meaningful 'conversations' with humans.

The lifestyles of humans and dragons are completely different.

Dragons live a life similar to animals, reigning over other beasts not out of care but by the principle of strength.

Weaker beasts follow dragons not for protection but merely because of the dragon's strength.

From a human perspective, this might seem barbaric: the strong survive, and the weak perish.

Dragons do not intervene if their weak subjects kill a powerless human.

This way of life has led dragons and humans to run parallel but separate paths.

Humans trying to converse with dragons were not understood, and the actions of dragons were incomprehensible to humans.

Failing to understand each other due to differing natures and ideologies, conflict was

inevitable.

Thus, dragons almost vanished from the empire due to ongoing conflicts, easily eliminated as they did not cooperate with each other.

When a dragon appears somewhere, it is promptly exterminated by a specially formed squad.

The presence of a dragon here is surprising.

According to the professors, it's a hatchling, so a dragon must have nested recently.

“Tomorrow, right away?”

Emily asked in surprise.

“We were going to catch it anyway. Why are you surprised now?”

“You said on the third day… it's sudden to fight now.”

“It doesn't matter if we fight on the second or third day.”

I moved the schedule up a day because of Evan.

If we fight the dragon, the commotion will be noticeable to everyone on the mountain.

If Evan hears this and attacks us, it will lead to significant damage.

We can't handle both Evan and the dragon simultaneously.

However, Evan is currently injured.

Rie must have severely injured Evan, rendering him unable to move recklessly.

This was an opportunity to seize.

"Then we should get up early tomorrow morning,"

Rie suggested, to which I nodded in agreement.

"Let's go to bed early then. The night watch will proceed as already planned."

Saying this, I glanced at Yuni.

Yuni, without a word, laid down.

Was she planning to act alone as usual?

I was curious but decided to lie down too.

Running around the mountain all day had left me exhausted.

The night deepened.

The next morning, we got up early and prepared, though there wasn't much to prepare for.

We didn't have much to take with us or any need to tidy up the surroundings.

However, Emily had something to do.

"Take this medicine after meals, change the bandages to prevent the wound from worsening, and apply this ointment,"

she instructed.

"Thank you,"

Diark said as he received the medicine from Emily.

We wanted to take Diark to the peak, but it was impossible in his condition.

Aware of this, he approached me first to discuss it.

After receiving a few necessary medicines from Emily, he decided to part ways with us.

"Don't move around too much. It might aggravate your wound,"

Emily advised.

"I understand. Thank you,"

Diark responded.

Emily then prescribed the medicine and stood up.

"I guess it's time to leave."

"Yes, let's go,"

I replied, looking at Yuni.

She was smiling and chatting with Rie.

I called out to her,

"Yuni."

"Yes?"

she responded, tilting her head to my question.

"Are you coming to the summit with us?"

"Oh, the summit? Wasn't that obvious? Why ask such an obvious question?"

Yuni shrugged her shoulders, her usual annoying smile on her face.

She looked better than yesterday, which was a relief, but her attitude still made me want to knock some sense into her head.

"When did you ever do anything on your own?"

"Eh, that was then. I'm going now, aren't I?"

"Fine, do as you please."

I nodded my head and rolled up my sleeves.

"Shall we go then?"

We began our trek towards the mountain's summit.

We agreed to meet Luna and the others near a big rock close to the summit, so our path was not much different from the one leading to the top.

On our way to the summit, we encountered several magical beasts, none of them particularly strong, so we dispatched them quickly, as if they were merely a meal.

Walking briskly, we finally reached the vicinity of the 'Big Boss Rock' at the mountain's summit.

"Hey! Rudy's here!"

Luna called out, waving her hand.

Locke and Kuhn were also there.

I smiled and looked around.

"Haven't Rika and Ena arrived yet?"

"No, not yet. It would be nice if they could arrive before lunch…"

Luna said this with a smile, then turned her gaze away.

I was surprised to see Yuni standing next to me.

"Yuni! You came too!"

"Yeah, it just happened that way. We met and came together."

"Really? That's great!"

Luna, delighted, grabbed Yuni's hand, causing Yuni to blush slightly.

"Did you have any trouble on the way? Any injuries?"

"Nope! I met Kuhn right at the start and came here safely!"

"That's good."

"Hehe."

Luna scratched the back of her head and laughed.

As she did, she glanced behind me.

"…!"

"Uhuhuhu…"

Behind me stood Rie, grinning slyly.

"Ru-Rudy, don't tell me…"

Luna's eyes widened in shock.

"Luna~~!"

"Uh… slow… down…"

That's when Ena and Riku's voices were heard.

"Oh, oh! Riku, Ena!"

Luna looked back and forth between Ena's group and me, perplexed.

"Luna! Can you take this?"

Ena was holding a large bag, likely filled with medicinal herbs.

"Uh, oh! Sure! Rudy… I'll see you in a bit…"

Luna rushed to help Ena with the bag, still casting suspicious glances my way.

Then Rie walked up to me.

"Huhu…"

"Why are you smiling like that?"

"It's my victory, isn't it? I'm the one who's with you."

"Don't say it like that…”

I sighed, looking at Rie.

It seemed like it was time to sort things out.

I couldn't keep up this situation forever.

I needed to come up with a plan.

I shook my head.

This wasn't the time for such thoughts.

When Ena and Riku had climbed up to the rock, I spoke up.

"Looks like everyone's here now…”

I shared my plan with everyone.

The critical steps needed to capture the Red Dragon.

It was a plan I had already discussed, but I reiterated it to reinforce it.

As I was explaining, Riku cautiously raised her hand.

"But… how exactly are we going to deal with the dragon's wings?"

The most crucial part of my plan was targeting the dragon's wings.

If the dragon could fly, our options would be severely limited.

So, the first thing we had to do was break its wings.

"Locke will take care of the wings."

Everyone's gaze turned to Locke, who was sitting nonchalantly on a rock, nodding his head.

I had discussed it with him beforehand, and he seemed prepared in his own way.

"And Luna, can you do what I asked?"

"Yes! No problem!"

"Good."

I nodded and looked at everyone.

"Remember what I told you. We're here to earn points, not out of some sense of duty. To score high in this evaluation, we need to avoid injuries as much as possible. If there's a risk of serious injury or a dangerous situation, run away immediately. It's okay if the plan falls apart; the priority is to escape. Think of your own benefit."

Everyone smiled at my words.

"Let's go then."

Together, we headed towards the summit of the mountain, towards the Red Dragon's nest.

Inside a large cave, there lay a being.

This being, wrapped in red scales, was a Red Dragon.

Young and not as large as a typical dragon, its majestic presence was still apparent.

The dragon was dreaming about the past, specifically a memory of its mother being captured and killed by humans.

The dragon stirred and lifted its head.

"Is it the sound of humans?"

Lately, there had been sounds of humans roaming the mountains, but the dragon had paid no mind.

Dragons typically don't act unless it concerns them directly.

Trying to sleep again after the unsettling dream, the dragon found rest elusive, unsure if it was the dream or the nearby humans that disturbed it.

Then, the sound of footsteps approached.

The dragon couldn't ignore the intrusion this time.

"Arrogant humans."

Its massive body caused the cave to rumble as it stood up and stepped out.

"Wow, it's huge."

"It's like a building moving…"

"Stay calm, Luna."

Outside the cave stood three humans - two women and a man.

The dragon scanned them.

"Only three?"

They seemed young and inexperienced, hardly the formidable opponents the dragon expected.

Disappointed, the dragon thought,

'I'll just send them away and go back to sleep.'

It didn't want to waste energy on such trivial intruders.

As the dragon was about to speak, one of the women summoned a wind spirit,

"Sylph."

The man then crouched down, and the spirit generated a strong wind beneath him, launching him at incredible speed towards the dragon.

The tiny human figure flew up to the dragon's face.

The dragon's eyes widened in shock.

"What the…”

The man, now in the air, punched the dragon's nose with tremendous force.

CHAPTER 190
DIRECTION (10)

Dragons are covered in scales of unbelievable toughness.

Even a normal sword cannot leave a scratch on these scales.

The scales are not only tough but also highly resistant to magic.

There are still ways to wound a dragon, despite such strong scales.

One can either attack with enough force to penetrate the scales or target areas without them.

“Huff…!”

I struck the dragon's nose.

Even in armor, there are gaps to exploit.

The dragon, though covered in scales, did not have them over its nose.

“Gurgh…!”

Blood spurted from the dragon's nose as it screamed, its eyes widening in shock.

I immediately shouted, seeing its reaction.

“Rie!”

At my call, wind enveloped the dragon.

The wind, like threads, began to entwine around the dragon's body.

“Krr…?”

The dragon struggled in confusion.

“Burn fiercely.”

As Rie murmured, the wind caught fire.

The wind, wrapping around the dragon, fueled the flames.

The fire on the dragon's body blazed intensely.

It was a technique Rie had prepared and honed.

This was a spell to enhance an elemental.

But it wasn't just about strengthening the elemental's power.

The wind created by the elemental could only manipulate and sharpen the air.

It was limited by the nature of the wind.

This magic broke that limitation.

It allowed partial weakening or strengthening of the elemental, giving free control over the form of the wind.

Moreover, it could alter the wind's nature, maintaining its form but changing its essence.

Like now, sending fire through the wind.

“Kr… Kra…!!!”

The dragon panicked as it caught fire.

Even with scales, there were gaps.

The flames crept into these gaps, tormenting the dragon.

The dragon thrashed in agony.

“Humans!!!!!”

Its thrashing caused sparks to fly, dimming the flames.

“Stick to the plan.”

“Yes!”

“Got it.”

Hearing Rie and Luna's response, I turned around.

We needed to reach our positions before the dragon regained its senses.

Rie used Sylph to move elsewhere, while Luna and I started running towards the back.

“Damn it!!!!”

The dragon raged at the sight of us.

But it couldn't follow.

If we hid ourselves towards the forest, the trees would conceal us from the dragon's view.

I quickly moved and looked at Luna.

"Luna, are you ready?"

"Yes!"

We walked a bit and then looked ahead.

It was a pit we had prepared earlier.

We jumped into that pit.

As soon as Luna entered the pit, she opened her magic book.

"Huff…"

Luna took a deep breath and moved her mana.

A strong light leaked from the magic book.

A large magic circle appeared in front of Luna.

Not just that.

Besides the large magic circle in front, smaller magic circles appeared around Luna.

"Think you can escape me!!!"

The dragon's roar was heard.

It was as expected.

It's coming now.

Since we were out of its sight, it would try to burn the entire direction we ran to.

Breath.

Depending on the dragon's type, the breath varied, but knowing what type of dragon this was, I knew the nature of its breath.

Being a Red Dragon, it spewed fire.

Luna's magic circles were prepared for this attack.

Magic circles with maximum fire resistance.

Magic circles that Luna had created day and night.

I trusted Luna and waited quietly.

"Activate!"

A small hemisphere appeared and enveloped Luna's body.

An enormous sound roared around us.

As the sound echoed, we saw red flames in front of us.

The flames covered the protective shield around us.

Gooong—

The shield vibrated intensely.

But it did not break.

It was withstanding the impact of the breath.

Seeing this, I immediately shouted.

"Locke!!!!"

During its breath attack, the dragon cannot move its body.

To spew such intense flames from its mouth, it needs a solid base.

The dragon presses its body to the ground to withstand the recoil of the breath.

That was our moment.

Our magic couldn't bind the dragon's body.

We might be able to tie its legs, but we couldn't control its wings.

So, we needed to create a situation where it couldn't move on its own.

Locke appeared behind the dragon.

He had been atop the cave before we lured the dragon out.

Locke fell onto the dragon's back, holding his sword forward.

"Northern swordsmanship…”

Blue sword aura enveloped Locke.

The sword aura gathered in the extended sword.

"Blue Bird."

Locke, falling from above the dragon, precisely aimed for its wings and pierced through them.

"Kr…!"

The dragon almost screamed, but it swallowed the sound as it was using its breath.

"Ugh…!"

Luna seemed to struggle to counter the breath, her expression contorted.

"Luna, just hold on a little longer!"

"Just a bit more…!"

A few seconds later, the flames subsided.

At the same time, the protective shield disappeared.

“Haa… Haa…,”

Luna, breathing heavily, collapsed to the ground.

Looking around, I could see how much stronger Luna had become.

The trees behind us had vanished as if a highway had been plowed through them.

The end was out of sight.

“Luna, great job.”

I reached out to help Luna stand.

Luna, getting up with my assistance, quietly said,

“Did I… do it?”

I smiled at Luna's words.

This entire operation was possible because of Luna.

It was her confident assertion that she could block the dragon's breath that allowed us to plan this.

“You did really well. Truly.”

“Hehehe…”

“Luna, senior!!”

Then, from a distance, Emily came running.

I handed Luna, whom I was supporting, over to Emily.

“I'll go and finish this. Take a break a little away from here. Emily, please take care of her.”

“Okay. We'll go to a safe place.”

“Rudy… be careful.”

After passing Luna to Emily, I walked towards the dragon.

The aftermath of the breath made it seem like a great battle had already taken place, but it was just the beginning.

Until now, it was just a strategy to prevent the dragon from escaping.

We hadn't defeated the dragon yet.

Walking a bit further, I saw the dragon glaring with wide eyes.

“Human… how dare you…”

The dragon spoke to me in a voice filled with rage.

It seemed a bit weakened from using its breath.

“What’s so daring about it? What’s so different between you and us?”

“Do you think the status of humans and dragons is the same? Pitiful humans.”

The dragon stepped forward.

“Deceitful and petty, fragile enough to break upon the slightest touch, humans and dragons are as different as heaven and earth.”

I snorted at the dragon’s words.

“Yeah, different. How can a lizard-headed creature like you be the same as humans?”

“What?”

“Dragons, barely surviving to the point of near-extinction, and humans, ruling the entire landmass. There’s no comparison.”

The dragon gritted its teeth at my words.

A murderous intent pierced my body.

“No use talking.”

I thought the same.

“Rudy.”

Then, I heard Rie's voice.

Yuni, Locke, Riku, Ena, Kuhn – all were ready for battle.

What seemed like many at first felt insufficient in front of the dragon’s massive body.

But I was confident.

I trusted my comrades, and they trusted me.

We could catch this little lizard ourselves.

I extended my hand.

“Priscilla, Behemoth.”

In front of me appeared a small elephant and a wolf with an enormous body.

“Pwoooh!!”

As Behemoth roared, the ground gripped the dragon's legs, swallowing them like quicksand.

“Grrr…”

The dragon struggled to escape the muddy ground.

“Electric Shock!!”

In the meantime, Yuni used her magic.

“Activate.”

Kuhn also activated his magical device, which contained telekinetic magic.

This device, created with the advice of Astina and Luna, pressed the dragon further into the mire.

The dragon sank deeper into the mud due to the telekinetic magic.

“Cough…”

The dragon, assaulted by Yuni's magic, continued to sink into the mud.

Having been grounded by Locke who had previously made a large hole in its wings, the dragon could not fly away.

Its efforts to escape with its legs were futile as it had sunk too deep.

At that moment, Riku received a large barrel from Ena, dipped her hand in it, and

shouted,

“Cloud!!”

Upon Riku's command, the liquid transformed into smoke, which rose above the dragon's head.

The smoke gathered, forming a cloud-like structure that began to rain down a strange liquid.

“You curs…!”

The dragon, sensing the suspicious liquid raining down, struggled to escape its position.

Its flailing sent mud flying towards Kuhn and Yuni nearby.

“Get away from there!”

Yuni and Kuhn quickly moved out of the way.

As their attacks stopped and the dragon's thrashing intensified, it began to break free from the mud.

“Sylph, bind it.”

Rie responded swiftly.

She enchanted Sylph to create wind, which tangled around the dragon, restraining it.

However, it wasn't enough to bind the entire body.

While its legs and body were restrained, the dragon still had its tail free.

Just as the dragon's tail was about to sweep the area, Locke, with blue sword aura enveloping his blade, lunged forward.

The blue aura pierced deeply through the scales of the tail.

“Graaah!!”

The dragon screamed in pain, thrashing violently.

Rie did her best to keep the dragon bound, shouting,

“Rudy! We can’t hold it much longer!”

“Got it.”

I gathered mana in my hand and looked at Priscilla.

“Priscilla, freeze it.”

“Understood.”

Priscilla's cold aura enveloped the dragon.

Crack…!

The liquid Riku had sprayed on the dragon gradually froze.

The dragon tried to break the ice encasing it.

“Grr…?”

Despite its struggles, the ice did not shatter.

The liquid Riku had used was no ordinary substance; it had the strength to withstand the dragon's thrashing without breaking when frozen.

“Phew…”

I gazed at the dragon as it continued to freeze over.

The jewel in my fist glowed brightly, emitting a strong vibration.

“Hu… mans.”

The dragon, seeing its body increasingly freeze, had an expression of disbelief.

Yet, it did not give up.

The dragon started to gather flames in its mouth, intending to fire one last breath attack.

“No way.”

I stomped on the ground, facing the dragon.

“Whoosh…!”

Just as the dragon was about to release the flames from its mouth, I, with mana filled in my fist, struck the dragon's jaw.

“Crash!”

The impact on the dragon's jaw forced its head to tilt upwards.

Whoosh! The breath it was holding spewed out into the sky.

I fell towards the ground, watching this unfold.

“Rudy!”

Rie ran towards where I was falling.

Sylph, beside her, blew wind in my direction.

Whoosh—

The wind acted like a cushion, softening my fall.

“Thanks, Rie.”

“Why did you have to jump like that…!”

“Ahaha…”

It was a relief that we managed to block the dragon's breath.

We looked at the dragon.

The dragon tried to thrash as much as it could, but it was futile.

“These humans, so powerless on their own…!”

The dragon shouted at us, but it was just a cry.

Its body continued to freeze, leaving only its mouth able to move.

I looked at the dragon.

“Dragons became extinct because they couldn’t do that.”

Unlike the dragon, living in its self-proclaimed superiority, acknowledging one's shortcomings and supporting each other was the survival method for those lacking individually.

I lifted the corners of my mouth.

CHAPTER 191
DIRECTION (11)

The fight was over.

The dragon's body was completely frozen.

However, its face did not freeze, probably due to the heat from its breath.

The dragon lay there motionless, its face peeking out from its frozen body.

Rie looked intently at the dragon, then shifted her gaze.

"What are we going to do with it now?"

"We have to kill it, what else?"

Priscilla was maintaining the freeze, but we couldn't just leave it like this forever.

If we don’t pay attention, the ice might melt, and the dragon could break free.

Rie responded to my words, licking her lips.

"How are we going to kill it?"

"…”

I was deep in thought about this.

I had thought about capturing it, but not about killing it.

Maybe I should keep hitting it on the head.

But then, I shook my head.

Even with a mana-infused fist, it wouldn't be enough to penetrate the dragon's

scales.

It didn't seem like that would kill the dragon.

"I'll try piercing its head."

Locke approached us, drawing his sword.

"Is that even possible?"

"I did it once before with its tail, why not a second time?"

Having pierced its tail with his sword earlier, he thought there was a possibility.

"Hiccup…"

Suddenly, there was a loud noise from the dragon's direction.

The dragon, which had been arrogant, thinking we couldn't kill it, now had its pupils shaking wildly.

I looked at Locke.

"Let's try it once."

"Okay, then…"

"Hey, hey!"

The dragon called out to us urgently.

We quietly looked at the dragon.

It hesitated and then spoke softly.

"Please spare me."

Even a dragon, a symbol of arrogance, did not want to die.

I looked at the dragon and smiled.

"I don't think so."

There was no reason to spare it.

Its entire body was a huge magic artifact.

The dragon's heart, scales, and claws were items worth a territory's budget.

These days, dragons are nearly extinct, and these items are hard to come by.

I didn’t have enough generosity to give that up for a stranger lizard.

Also, I wouldn't get points if I didn't kill it.

It's about the evaluation and the money.

There was no benefit for me in sparing it.

Instead, it could be a future nuisance.

"Locke."

"Please, really, I'll be good. I won't bother humans, I'll live quietly in the mountains. I won't do anything, I'll do as humans say. Just spare me, please… Sob…”

The dragon spoke rapidly, pleading for its life.

With a desperate voice and tears streaming down, the dragon pleaded.

Rie looked at the dragon with a look of disbelief.

“…Do dragons usually do this?"

“…I wouldn't know."

The dragon was pathetically begging for its life in front of me.

I felt as if my image of dragons was shattering into pieces.

"Hmm…”

I pondered internally, calculating the situation.

Is there any benefit to sparing its life?

How can I ensure it doesn't betray us if we let it live?

I decided to think it over slowly.

"Rudy! Is it over?"

Then, from a distance, Luna and Emily approached.

"Sort of?"

"Wow… when you look at it closely, it's really big."

Luna looked up at the dragon, then tilted her head in confusion.

“…Is the dragon crying?"

"Sob… Sob…”

“…It's crying for its life."

Luna covered her mouth with a shocked and sympathetic expression.

I felt like this was going to be a real headache.

"Rudy…”

"No."

I cut off Luna's words, responding firmly.

But Luna puffed up her cheeks in response.

"It's pitiful. It's just asking to be spared!"

"How many people has it killed?"

“…I, I've never killed anyone."

The dragon spoke softly.

"See, it says it hasn't killed anyone."

“…We don't know if that's a lie or not."

"It's not a lie! I'm a young hatchling! My mother was also friendly with humans!"

“…A dragon friendly with humans?"

I had never heard such a thing.

If there had been a dragon trying to befriend humans, it would have been a topic of discussion in the magical beast studies.

But there was no such record.

"When I was in my mother's lair, I befriended a few humans! It's true!"

The dragon said this and then quietly bowed its head.

"However… my mother was killed by those humans."

I looked at the dragon skeptically.

I wondered if it was lying, trying to exploit Luna's sympathy.

But that wasn't the important part.

"If we don't kill it, we won't get any points."

We had wasted a lot of time trying to capture the dragon.

Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, so we could still fight others, but catching up with others' scores would be difficult.

"Are we going to settle for a low rank?"

“…If we get the points, will you spare it?"

Luna glanced at me, asking cautiously.

“…I'll think about it."

Then Luna raised her hand high.

"Teaching assistant! You're watching, right?"

Luna shouted into the void.

"Please come out for a moment!"

A few seconds after shouting, a teaching assistant emerged from the forest and walked towards us.

"Did you hear our conversation?"

"Yes… I did hear it."

The assistant scratched their head.

It must have been a tricky situation for the academy as well.

"The dragon is begging so desperately, don't you feel sorry for it?… If we can reform the dragon, it's essentially the same as dealing with a magical beast, so shouldn't we receive points?"

“…Firstly, I don't think it's my place to decide. I'll ask Professor Cromwell."

The assistant pulled out a square box from their pocket and brought it to their ear.

A light emitted from the box, and they spoke.

“…Yes, Professor. Yes. Have you seen the situation? Yes. Uh-huh… Understood."

The assistant nodded several times and closed the box.

"Professor Cromwell says that it's not about killing the magical beast, but assessing if

we can handle one, so points will be awarded. However, the management of the dragon is up to the students. If you can't manage it, legal punishments may apply."

"Really!"

Luna clapped her hands happily.

She then looked triumphantly at me.

"So, we're good now?"

"I can… live?"

I looked sharply at the dragon.

Leaving such a treasure alive…

And we are to manage it?

On the other hand, there was also the question of whether we could even kill the dragon.

We didn't know for sure if it was possible.

Would the dragon still be so compliant after we attempted to kill it and decided it wasn't possible?

We also might lose the points if we aren't able to tame it.

After much thought, I looked at the others.

"What do you all think?"

Rie then spoke up.

"There's no need to kill unnecessarily. We are humans, not magical beasts."

Her words seemed exemplary, but her expression was one of annoyance.

She probably found it difficult to kill the dragon and wanted to finish the matter

quickly.

Yuni looked at Rie, then turned to me and raised her hand.

"But if we spare it, how do we manage it? If we release it and it just flies away, we'll be penalized."

"We'll need to cast a restricting spell."

It could be done in the same way Principal McDowell placed a restraint on Yeniel.

Thinking it best to strike while the iron is hot, I looked at the assistant.

"Assistant, could you ask Professor Cromwell to prepare a contract tool for imposing a restraint?"

"Yes, I'll arrange it."

It would be too late if we waited until after the assessment, so this much help should be possible.

"Does this mean we are sparing the dragon?"

"Yes."

It was a pity that we couldn't replace its heart or other important parts with magical tools, but there was no other option.

More importantly, I wondered how we could utilize the dragon.

If we put a magical restraint on it, we would have to find a way to make use of it…

I looked at the dragon, licking my lips.

"Then, you're going to spare me?"

"Yes! Dragon, you're going to be spared!"

"Thank you… Thank you so much."

"Ah, but before that."

I extended my hand towards the dragon, realizing I had forgotten something.

“…Yes?"

"Thinking about it, I recall the words you said earlier?"

"…”

"What were they again? Deceitful? Petty? And something about being nothing on your own…?"

"I'm sorry… I spoke thoughtlessly to the humans…”

I crossed my arms and looked at the dragon, curious to see how far it would go with its words.

The dragon, sensing my gaze, continued.

“…Jumping around aimlessly, even less than a mere bug, a worthless lizard… Don't mind the words of this trash-like dragon. I spoke those words due to my far inferior knowledge compared to humans… Sob…”

Seeing the dragon, known for its pride, utter such words made me smile.

As I smiled broadly, Rie and Yuni glared at me.

"Are you a pervert?"

"Hmm~? Senior, do you like that sort of thing?"

I coughed at their comments.

"Cough, I'm just accepting the apology I'm owed."

And so, we decided to spare the dragon.

After the contract was completed, the dragon, having sustained significant injuries, entered its lair and fell asleep.

We slowly started packing up the gear we had prepared for capturing the dragon.

Luna, while gathering her things, stopped and looked at me sitting quietly.

"What are you going to do now, Rudy?"

"I plan to stay around here."

Having captured the dragon, we had amassed a substantial amount of points.

Apart from Luna, Rie, and Locke who were here with me, my score was incomparable to the others.

Additionally, I had run into many students before arriving here, creating a significant gap in points between me and the others present.

Thus, I was just waiting for one person.

I was certain he would come here.

The fact that there was a dragon at the mountain's peak was known to all the students.

Only a few could actually capture this dragon.

He would know.

He would know that I had fought the dragon.

Curiosity alone would bring him here to see what kind of battle had taken place.

I looked at everyone and smiled.

"I'll be waiting here for Evan."

CHAPTER 192
DIRECTION (12)

"You're going to fight him again after battling a dragon?"

"Then we'll stay here too."

"Rudy! What kind of trouble are you getting into now!"

Everyone chided me in their own way.

I sent them all away.

Fighting alongside them would be helpful, but it was meaningless.

The reason I wanted to fight Evan was not to steal his points.

I looked at Priscilla, who was sitting beside me.

"Priscilla, can you do it?"

"As long as that elephant fights properly."

Priscilla pointed to Behemoth, who was rolling around in the distance.

"Pwoooh."

Behemoth seemed pleased with the mud he had created, rolling around in it.

"Priscilla, go play for a bit. You like walks."

"Is that okay?"

"Why not, Evan won't be coming now."

Even if he did, Priscilla could quickly return, so it wasn't a big issue.

"Just don't use your powers too much. I'm tired too."

"Got it. I'll just walk around nearby."

Priscilla walked away with a pleasant smile.

I looked up at the sky.

The sunset was slowly setting.

With all the trees gone, the red sunset was clearly visible.

I was mentally exhausted from using Priscilla's abilities to fight the dragon.

Freezing the dragon's entire body, it seemed Priscilla also used her abilities significantly for the first time in a while.

I try not to use Priscilla's abilities when I fight.

I knew all too well the fate of those who had used Priscilla before.

It was well documented in books, and Cromwell had warned me several times.

But Priscilla wasn't a bad entity.

She was just like a dog… no, more like a puppy.

She liked walks and readily helped with anything I asked.

The previous contractors simply didn't use Priscilla properly.

If asked whether I know how to use Priscilla well, I would shake my head.

I wasn't sure to what extent I could use Priscilla, and it was difficult to gauge her limits.

Mental exhaustion wasn't something you could calculate numerically.

It had to be sensed intuitively.

Priscilla seemed unaware of these limits as well.

"To use Priscilla better… I need to understand this too."

She was so obedient and her abilities so useful that I called upon her in almost every fight.

Priscilla had now become a significant part of my strength.

I needed to learn how to use not just my abilities but all of Priscilla's as well.

I should learn about spirits, but the only person around me who handled spirits was Rie.

The problem was that I couldn't learn from Rie.

Priscilla and ordinary spirits were practically different entities.

I pondered deeply and then remembered someone.

Serina.

Didn't Rie say she received teachings from Serina not long ago?

I heard she was staying near the academy.

Serina's mother was definitely a former contractor of Priscilla.

Then, could Serina know something about Priscilla?

But…

Serina wasn't the one who contracted, it was her mother, so I wondered how much help she would be.

Still, once this assessment is over, I should ask her.

There's no one else to ask about Priscilla but Serina…

Though I was making various plans on my own, there was something else I needed

to do first.

Dealing with Evan.

It wasn't something I needed to do right away.

I was just resting and waiting for Evan.

Evan was sitting in one spot, meditating.

He was healing his body by absorbing energy from the surrounding trees through nature magic.

Then, a loud explosion was heard from the top of the mountain.

The sound was followed by half of the mountain burning.

Fortunately, the opposite side of the mountain burned, so Evan was not greatly affected.

However, it was highly irritating.

Such a commotion at the mountain's summit meant someone fought a dragon.

Only one person could fight that.

'…Rudy Astria.'

Always someone who takes actions that astonish everyone.

Among the students, he was likely the only one who would think to catch a dragon.

His abilities, too, were capable, and he was the only person bold enough to make such a choice.

Did Rudy Astria catch the dragon?

He didn't know.

He had to see it with his own eyes.

As these thoughts filled his mind, something boiled inside Evan.

Some might call it jealousy, others inferiority complex.

Regardless, the result was the same.

Evan picked up his sword.

'Tomorrow, I go to the top of the mountain.'

If Rudy Astria was defeated by the dragon, he would catch it.

If victorious, he would find and overcome Rudy Astria.

He wasn't sure what it meant, but he had to do it.

He wanted to be the top student.

Yeniel told him to wield the sword with conviction, but changing his mind suddenly was impossible.

To stand above Rudy Astria.

That was Evan's goal, his ideology, the only purpose in his life.

Rudy had done nothing wrong.

He wasn't a bad person.

Evan knew this.

He even knew that he was the strange one.

Yet, Evan took up the sword.

He had no choice but to direct it at Rudy Astria.

As Yeniel said, Evan's sword has no meaning if it's not aimed at Rudy Astria.

Without aiming for the top, he would lose his way.

He wasn't driven by a greater cause or conviction.

Even if it was disgraceful, even if he was pointed at, there was only one thing to do.

He could only hope.

If he became the top student and defeated Rudy Astria, then he might find another goal.

See the next place.

And… become an ideal person like Rudy Astria.

Evan's goal was Rudy Astria.

Both as a target to be surpassed and as an ideal to aspire to.

Rudy Astria was enviable.

A person respected by everyone around him.

Someone with the courage to risk danger for others.

A person with such skills and character.

That's why.

"I will surpass Rudy Astria."

It was all about striving to exceed Rudy Astria.

If he could surpass him, a different perspective might be revealed.

But, if even after defeating Rudy Astria, or if he fails and still can't find his path,

Then there would be no reason to stay at the academy anymore.

He would have to leave and find a new goal.

As Yeniel said, a lost sword only cuts down the innocent.

The next day, Evan headed to the mountain's summit.

The trees along the path to the summit were all burned down, and the ground was charred black.

There were also signs of intense fighting, with the ground deeply gouged in places.

'What happened to the dragon?'

Evan looked towards the summit.

With all the trees burned down along the path, the view was clear.

However, there was no sign of the dragon.

If yesterday's fight resulted in a victory over the dragon, its corpse should have been visible.

'Did they lose?'

The thought didn't last long.

In the distance, he saw a person sitting on a small rock, accompanied by a small elephant and a silver-furred wolf.

"It's been a while since we've faced each other like this, Evan,"

said the blond man, smiling in greeting.

"It's our first time having a conversation like this. Rudy Astria,"

Evan said to Rudy.

The two had never talked before.

The only interaction they had was during the last joint assessment when they

collided.

"Did you earn many points?"

"Not as much as you, who caught a dragon, but I earned enough."

Seeing Rudy sitting there unharmed amidst the destruction, it was clear he had caught the dragon.

Rudy's expression changed from a smile.

"You didn't just bully kids and steal their easy points, did you?"

"What concern is that of yours?"

"Why harass other students with your abilities? You could have caught an enormous number of magical beasts."

"I dealt with whoever was in front of me."

Their conversation wasn't awkward, though they had never spoken before.

It felt like talking to a long-time friend.

Rudy stood up.

"I respect you, Evan, and think there are things to learn from you."

He knew the extent of Evan's efforts to become stronger and claim the top position.

Rudy himself had reduced his sleep and exerted bone-grinding, blood-spilling effort for good grades.

Evan was no different.

Evan's abilities were unique, but not a talent.

Uniqueness doesn't mean talent.

It was more of a curse.

Instead of following a path laid by others, he had to forge his own.

While carving his own path, Evan also balanced regular studies.

This wasn't a matter of talent.

It meant investing his time, foregoing rest and comfort, and enduring.

"But now, I think you're straying a bit off course."

Evan said nothing in response.

Rudy clenched his fist, channeling mana.

CHAPTER 193
DIRECTION (13)

Rudy quickly reached Evan.

Their eyes met up close.

'Let's fight.'

'I'll defeat you.'

In that brief moment, they communicated through their eyes.

Evan swung his sword widely.

Clang.

Rudy blocked the sword with his hand.

Even if the sword's blade was sharp, it was nothing compared to the magical tool Rudy had painstakingly created.

Rudy grabbed the blade and smiled.

"Still using that sword, I see."

Andrei's sword.

It was the sword Rudy had given to Evan.

Despite its incredible ability to nullify magic, Rudy had handed it over to Evan.

Thanks to this sword, Evan had developed a higher-level technique to cut through the flow of mana.

Evan was unaware of this fact.

Evan pressed Rudy with his sword.

In terms of strength, Rudy was not inferior and did not falter.

As they reached a standoff, Evan spoke.

"Elementals."

Green light swirled behind Evan.

The light gradually took shape.

Deer, rabbits, horses.

The light transformed into animal forms.

Special elementals roaming the mountains.

Evan could borrow their power without directly contracting with these special elementals.

Dozens of elementals stood behind Evan, showing hostility towards Rudy.

Rudy had anticipated this situation.

Elementals and nature are inseparable.

In such a forest, he predicted the presence of numerous elementals.

Once Evan learned to handle special elementals, it was clear he would use them.

"Behemoth, Priscilla."

"Pwoooh."

"Is that an order to block all of them?"

Priscilla and Behemoth, who were behind Rudy, sighed.

The dozens of elementals behind Evan felt like a small legion.

Although they might be weaker individually since Evan had not directly contracted with them, their sheer number was overwhelming.

"Just hold them off."

Rudy glanced back and spoke.

Priscilla smiled at his words.

"It's demotivating to be asked to just hold off when we need to fight."

Cold air rose around Priscilla.

The chill began to freeze the surrounding ground.

Priscilla looked down at Behemoth beneath her.

"Hey, elephant, are you ready?"

"Pwoooh!"

With that response, Behemoth rolled its foot.

Crack. Although it was a small foot roll, the surrounding ground began to split.

The splitting ground, dividing into several paths, grew larger as it advanced.

Its effect reached Evan and Rudy in front.

As the ground where Evan and Rudy stood began to split, they both leaped backward.

The split progressed, reaching the elementals behind them.

Caught off guard by the sudden ground split, the elementals couldn't react quickly.

Short-legged and slow-moving elementals fell into the split ground.

"Freeze."

Seeing the elementals fall, Priscilla froze the split gap, preventing them from coming out.

Thanks to the dragon burning the surrounding forest, Evan and the elementals couldn't exert their full power.

'This won't do.'

Evan quickly decided.

He moved his mana, sending it into the ground.

His mana spread around, and green light swirled on the ground.

"Forest."

With Evan's command, sprouts emerged amidst the green light.

Sprouts grew, flowers bloomed, and trees rose.

A spell he used during the individual assessment.

It was magic that instantly created a forest around him.

However, it wasn't as vast as the forest he had created during the individual assessment.

This spell energizes the seeds buried in the ground, causing them to grow rapidly.

But the dragon had burnt the land, leaving few seeds remaining.

Moreover, since Priscilla had frozen the ground, the weaker seeds couldn't break through the ice and failed to sprout.

A considerably small forest was formed.

Rudy watched and laughed.

"I was wondering when you'd use that."

Rudy moved his mana.

Light seeped from his gloves.

However, it was different from when he used his fist.

When he charged directly into combat, the gem on the back of his hand shone, but now, the glove itself emitted light.

Specifically, the circuits on the glove glowed.

"Hellfire Ascension."

As Rudy spoke, black flames spread around him.

The black flames approached the forest created by Evan and began to consume it.

The flames that had spread around converged towards one place.

That place was where Evan stood.

Evan didn't just watch.

Though unfamiliar with dark magic, he knew something powerful would happen if those flames gathered.

Holding his sword, he gathered the mana of the forest.

A sword aura-like energy appeared from his sword.

Evan pulled the sword inward and swung it.

The surroundings turned green.

The flames subsided, and the surrounding flowers and grass grew fresher.

The roots and leaves of the plants covered the flames, making them disappear.

It felt as if life was swallowing death.

Countless life forces devoured Rudy's flames and the ice created by Priscilla.

The split ground started to reconnect with the roots of the plants, and the elementals that had fallen below climbed out using those roots.

"Ah…"

Rudy watched in awe.

Life had been bestowed upon the land destroyed by the dragon.

Roots took hold in the ground, turning the barren land fertile again.

Then, a tree behind Evan began to grow.

It grew so tall that it almost reached the sky, engulfing the surroundings.

"Rudy Astria."

The elementals that emerged from behind Evan walked forward.

They, who had appeared as ordinary animals, now radiated power.

With more plants and stronger natural forces, the elementals' power also increased.

"Now, let's finish this."

Hearing Evan's words, Rudy looked at the tree behind Evan.

A tree slightly smaller than the dragon.

It was an enormous tree.

If someone were to stand in front of this, they would feel utterly insignificant, overwhelmed by its immense vitality.

Yet, Rudy moved forward with a smile.

"Let's see what you've got, Evan."

Evan, observing Rudy's advance, curled his lips upward.

He gathered energy in his sword.

The massive tree behind Evan shone brilliantly.

"Attack."

The elementals behind Evan charged towards Rudy.

Behemoth and Priscilla also moved forward simultaneously.

Behemoth attempted to split the ground, but the tangled roots of the tree prevented it.

Priscilla created several ice chunks and started hunting the elementals with her sharp teeth.

She wanted to use her ice powers but refrained, fearing it might burden Rudy.

As Behemoth and Priscilla couldn't fully utilize their abilities, the elementals reached Rudy.

Rudy confronted them, mana in hand, snapping the neck of a deer and blocking a horse's kick.

It felt like battling dozens of animals, only these were stronger than ordinary ones.

While Rudy dealt with the elementals, Evan raised his sword.

A massive mana swirled around Evan's blade.

It was the same technique he used during the individual assessment.

"Phew…"

Rudy took a deep breath.

"Just have to endure it once."

Evan swung his sword.

A green light enveloped the surroundings.

A vast swarm of light.

Evan created an even larger swarm of light than in his individual assessment.

Rudy was renowned for his ability to move swiftly for short distances, so Evan used a larger technique to prevent him from escaping its range.

Kwagagagagak!

The green light, which had just been bestowing life, now ravaged the surroundings.

A massive explosion occurred.

The light destroyed even the trees it had created, enveloping the vicinity.

Evan was certain.

Rudy couldn't have escaped.

"Phew… Phew…”

Exhausted, Evan adjusted his mana, remembering how he had lost consciousness during the individual assessment.

Still, the use of such a significant amount of mana left his body drained.

Evan exhaled roughly, looking ahead.

The swarm of light gradually faded.

Thud—

Then, a sound of feet kicking the ground was heard.

"Ah?"

Rudy burst through the light, lunging forward.

His clothes were mostly torn, blood flowed from his head, and his entire body seemed burned, reddened as if scorched.

Yet, he charged forward.

Rudy had pondered a lot about Evan's technique.

This contemplation wasn't done alone; he had asked Rie, Luna, Astina, Gracie, and others.

How to block Evan's technique.

How to avoid it.

Despite deep thought, no answer emerged.

With the joint assessment approaching, learning new magic was not feasible.

Therefore, Rudy chose a frontal assault.

He received the technique head-on.

Strengthening his body with mana to endure as much as possible.

If Evan used the same ability as in the individual assessment, Rudy would try hard to dodge, but he didn't expect it to be easy.

Certainly, Evan must have thought of a way to counter this.

So he won't avoid it.

Instead, he thinks about what comes after.

Evan's eyes widened at the sight of Rudy suddenly charging towards him.

He assumed a defensive stance to block the approaching Rudy.

Green mana acted like a shield in front of Evan.

However, Rudy didn't approach Evan directly.

Instead, he bypassed Evan and headed towards the large tree behind him.

The tree, as big as a dragon, became Rudy's target.

Rudy clenched his fist.

Intense light emitted from the jewel in his hand.

It was a brilliance he had never seen before.

Rudy struck the tree with his fist.

The tree growing behind Evan was a manifestation of Evan's mana itself.

It wasn't a separate entity like the surrounding plants.

Despite Rudy's strength, it seemed impossible to damage that unharmed tree.

Or so it should have been.

"An opening."

Rudy's fist pierced through a gap in the tree.

On the way back from the Railer family, Rudy learned about mana flow from Robert.

Since then, Rudy had been able to read all the mana around him.

But knowing the flow didn't mean he could do much about it.

It's common knowledge that a wizard's mana gathers at the heart, but who doesn't know that the heart is a person's weak point?

Who doesn't know that the core of a magic tool is at its center?

Few possess skills like necromancy, where the core can move around.

Most of the time, even knowing where mana gathers doesn't mean you can destroy

it.

However, the current situation was different.

The tree was Evan, and Evan was the tree.

Their flow was identical.

They were interconnected.

Rudy read that flow.

If he could break the tree, he could disrupt Evan's mana flow.

In a normal state, the flow would be stable, making it hard to find a gap, but Evan was using powerful magic.

Thus, the mana flow in the tree was unstable.

Rudy found a gap in that unstable flow.

Inserting his hand into a normal flow would have swept him away, but striking at the gap in an unstable flow could sever it.

Rudy thrust his fist into the gap of the flow.

Thud—

The tree resonated loudly, and at that moment, the movements of the surrounding elementals stopped.

Simultaneously, Evan's mana wavered.

"Cough…”

Evan exhaled deeply.

He felt as though he had been hit in the chest, struggling to breathe.

The tree shook violently.

Though his body wasn't physically hit, Evan's mana was disrupted.

Just as Evan erased magic by cutting mana flow, Rudy had also pierced through the mana flow.

From the point Rudy pierced, cracks began to form.

Thus, the tree broke apart, and pieces of the shattered tree fell from the sky.

"Rudy… Astria…”

Evan looked at Rudy, astonished, as if he had never considered such a technique.

Rudy's skill involved manipulating mana flow, a tactic characteristic of Evan.

Evan never expected anyone else to use this technique.

Although there were papers on mana flow, there was no information on the ability to manipulate it.

"How's the punch?"

Rudy shouted as he fell from the sky and raised his fist again.

He didn't miss the moment when Evan was shaken.

"Ugh…!"

Evan barely managed to lift his sword again.

His mana was greatly disturbed, but if he couldn't withstand Rudy's attack now, it would mean defeat.

Evan gathered mana in his sword.

Roots from the surrounding trees sprang up.

Simultaneously, green-colored mana enveloped Evan's sword.

The roots, along with Evan's sword, aimed at Rudy falling from the sky.

"Evan."

Rudy smiled.

"Once, you were almost like a hero to me."

Rudy spoke, holding his fist.

Evan didn't understand what he meant.

That was only natural.

Rudy was referring to a time when he observed Evan in a different world.

In a world where Evan was a hero.

Rudy admired the Evan of that world.

In Rudy's heart, Evan was a superhuman.

That's why Rudy thought he could never replace Evan.

However, the Evan in reality was different from Rudy's thoughts.

Evan was just an ordinary boy, no different from himself.

He worked hard to cultivate his abilities, experienced failures, and wasn't particularly sociable.

Evan wasn't a superhuman or a hero.

He was just a boy struggling and making tremendous efforts.

This was the same for Rudy.

He wasn't a hero or a superhuman.

He was just someone struggling to protect those around him.

Although Rudy saw a future where he came closest to being a hero or superhuman,

that too wasn't actually the case.

Even in that position, he couldn't protect everyone.

Realizing this, Rudy made a decision.

He wasn't replacing Evan's position nor was he a hero.

He couldn't overcome everything alone without the help of those around him.

Rudy understood his role.

'My role is to enable everyone to do what they must.'

And now, it was time to return Evan to his original place.

"Put your all into your sword."

Black flames surged in Rudy's fist.

Simultaneously, the mana stone on the back of his hand emitted an intense light.

"I'll put my all into this fist."

Mana around Rudy stirred violently.

CHAPTER 194
DIRECTION (14)

A massive explosion occurred.

Rudy's fist collided with Evan's sword, and the forest Evan had created was devastated.

Smoke billowed up.

Black sparks flew around.

Thud. Thud.

With a slight pause, the sound of ash being trampled on was heard.

"It's my victory… Evan."

Rudy, wiping the blood flowing down his head, spoke.

"Kuh…"

Evan lay on the ground, groaning.

At a glance, Evan seemed less injured than Rudy.

However, he had internal injuries, blood dripping from his mouth, unable to get up.

Rudy looked down at Evan.

Next to Evan lay his broken sword.

"Rudy… Astria…"

"With no direction and no conviction, you can't beat me."

It was a matter of willpower.

When Evan and Rudy last clashed.

Rudy suffered external injuries, while Evan was shocked by mana.

It wouldn't have been strange for either to fall.

However, their wills were different.

Rudy endured the pain attacking his body.

Even if it felt like his body was breaking, even if he wanted to escape the pain.

He punched out.

Evan was defeated by that will.

Evan's mana faltered before Rudy could escape the pain.

Evan thought to himself.

What is this guy, really?

He seemed strange from afar, but even stranger up close.

Even with great strength, one can fear the future and doubt their own will.

Rudy did not.

He pushed forward with a straight will and pure conviction.

The difference between himself and Rudy felt even more pronounced.

Evan, aimlessly driven only by the desire to beat Rudy, felt different in his will from Rudy.

Evan had the word 'defeat' in his heart.

He repeated to himself that he shouldn't lose, but also wondered if it would matter if

he did.

Evan wanted victory for the sake of victory.

He didn't think he had to do anything with his victories.

At the same time, he didn't believe any particular outcome would result from defeat.

Evan looked at Rudy with empty eyes.

"You… what exactly…"

What makes his will so strong?

What goal does he have, what is he looking at?

As Evan harbored these questions, Rudy sat beside him.

"Sigh, you really have a tough life."

Rudy sighed, looking at Evan.

"Stop wandering aimlessly, and find a proper place for yourself. What's going to change if you just sulk in the dark? Study and train at your own pace, and make friends, socialize a bit."

Though Rudy said this, these words were also meant for his past self.

Evan, as he was now, seemed no different from his past self.

He appeared to be running aimlessly forward, without any particular goal in sight.

“Don’t get involved with those weird rebels or anything.”

“…What?”

Evan's eyes widened at Rudy's words.

His investigations into the rebels were something Evan had conducted very secretly.

“If you think you align with the rebels' objectives, I won’t stop you, but from what I see, you and the rebels don’t really match.”

The rebels aimed to change the world.

They were willing to do anything for the future peace, even if it meant sacrifices now.

Such objectives didn't suit Evan.

Rudy felt the same way about himself.

Both of them just wanted their close ones to live peacefully and stably.

Rather than achieving sudden big changes, they preferred maintaining current peace, even if it meant changing things slowly.

Evan looked at Rudy, who lay there lazily, and said,

“What do you know about me to talk like that?”

“Probably more than you think?”

“We haven’t even had a proper conversation until today.”

“Often talking doesn’t really mean you know someone, does it?”

“Ha…!”

Evan laughed incredulously at Rudy's words.

Rudy knew he had been in contact with the rebels and claimed to know him well?

Evan silently glared at Rudy and then spoke.

“Are you gay?”

“You crazy…”

Rudy clenched his fist and looked at Evan.

“You need to be hit more, huh? Want more?”

“…No, that’s enough.”

After asking such an absurd question, Evan took a deep breath.

It had been a while since he had laid down so leisurely.

While lying there comfortably, Evan asked Rudy,

“Rudy Astria, you said you know a lot about me.”

“Yeah.”

Evan quietly clenched his fist.

“So, what should I do now?”

Evan had keenly felt the difference between himself and Rudy during this encounter.

Rudy had a goal and was working towards it.

That’s why his will was exceptional.

It was something Evan could not dare to surpass.

No matter how hard he tried, he felt he could never surpass that will, nor could he take the top position.

So, what should he do now?

He had nowhere else to go.

Thus, Evan asked Rudy, grasping at straws.

Rudy frowned at Evan's question.

“What kind of question is that?”

“You said it yourself. Living aimlessly without conviction. I have nowhere to go.”

Rudy tilted his head, puzzled.

“Do you really need somewhere to go?”

“What?”

“Just enjoy life, you fool. Relax a bit. Just go with the flow, and you’ll find your answer. You’re not powerless, nor worried about the future. Just take it easy, and if you see someone struggling, help them out. You’re not some great person who needs a strong conviction.”

Evan narrowed his brows.

“You were talking about convictions, weren’t you?”

“That meant you couldn’t beat me because you lack conviction, not that you necessarily need to have one.”

Rudy spoke lightly.

There was no point in elaborating on convictions and goals here.

What Evan needed was time.

Time would bring him his own convictions and goals.

Feeling it himself is better than being told a hundred times.

In fact, telling too much might even lead to someone’s downfall.

So, what Evan needed was time to think and rest.

Evan, who had always aimed for the top without any real purpose, must have been exhausted.

Taking a break from that burden and resting would surely bring some answers.

What comes next was not Rudy's job.

It was something Evan had to do himself.

“Well, then.”

“Hmm?”

Rudy stood up and looked at Evan.

“Now, just take one hit.”

“What?”

"That's the only way I can get your points."

Rudy grinned.

“I’ll go easy on you, so just pass out in one hit, okay?”

“Ah, no. Why can’t I just forfeit instead of being hit?”

“If you forfeit, I can’t take your score.”

“You’re going to be first anyway, do you need my score?”

“You never know. Some impressive guy might have scored higher than me.”

Rudy raised his fist.

“Here I go.”

“No!”

Rudy swung his fist, hitting Evan on the head.

“Cough! You crazy…”

“What, you didn’t pass out? Let’s do it again.”

Thump!

“Gah… You…”

“Hey, just pass out already.”

Thump!

“Agh!!”

“Pass out, will you?”

After about ten hits, Evan finally lost consciousness.

His forehead was reddened with bruises, and a few lumps were visible on his head.

Looking at the fallen Evan, Rudy had a pleased smile on his lips.

“Ah, that was refreshing.”

It was Rudy's own form of revenge.

A retaliation for all the frustrating actions Evan had taken until now.

And the headaches caused by Evan's attempt to contact the rebels.

Still, since Evan hadn't caused any major disasters, Rudy let him off with a few slaps and bumps.

Thus, Evan was carried away by the instructors and eliminated from the assessment.

“But when will this end?”

The sun was gradually setting.

Without a watch, it was hard to tell the time, but it seemed like it was reaching the end.

“I should just rest…”

Rudy staggered, looking for a sunny spot to sit on a rock.

Whoosh—

Just then, a small stone flew towards him.

"Ah?"

Rudy noticed the incoming stone.

But.

Thump—

He couldn't dodge it.

Having used too much mana and being in a disheveled state, he could only watch as the stone approached him.

The stone hit Rudy squarely on the head, and he immediately…

“Damn it…”

Collapsed.

“What?”

The culprit who threw the stone was none other than Yeniel.

Yeniel stepped forward and looked down at Rudy lying at her feet.

“……”

She hadn't expected him to collapse so easily from such an attack.

Yeniel had only come to check.

She had come to the mountain intending to challenge Rudy since McDowell had instructed her to achieve good results.

Of course, she had thought of taking advantage of the fierce battle that had occurred at the summit, but she hadn't planned on winning so easily.

Yeniel looked down at Rudy, clicked her tongue, and muttered to herself.

"Well, he's down, so he's down."

Beep—

Just as Yeniel was speaking to herself, a loud sound echoed through the mountain.

"The joint assessment for first and second years is now concluded."

“What’s he doing?”

Cromwell watched Rudy's situation with an incredulous look.

Who would have thought Rudy, who withstood a dragon ravaging half the mountain and Evan using an unbelievable technique, would collapse from a mere stone?

“If you win a fight, you should run away or do something.”

It was entirely Rudy’s fault.

Even if it hadn’t been Yeniel, whoever arrived there would have ended up in the same situation.

Rudy was a fool for letting his guard down after defeating Evan.

“That's just unbelievable.”

The instructors around Cromwell shared the same expression.

Rudy's performance during the assessment had been bold and wise, impressive enough to move even the instructors.

But what good was that?

Cromwell, feeling exasperated, spoke.

“So, Yeniel is the winner. The principal will be pleased.”

Having said that, Cromwell stood up and looked at the instructors.

“Take care of the students. Treat the injured ones. And send a good healing wizard to

that foolish Rudy. So he doesn't feel too aggrieved when he sees his injuries after waking up."

"……Yes, understood."

With that, Cromwell and the instructors headed towards the mountain where the joint assessment took place.

CHAPTER 195
JEFRIN (1)

After the joint assessment ended, Evan met with Yeniel and had a conversation.

It wasn't a profound discussion.

Just ordinary talk about each other's well-being.

They talked about what happened during the joint assessment.

The determination he felt from Rudy Astria.

It was different from Evan's.

Rudy didn't hesitate.

There was no doubt in his actions.

He was confident in what he was doing and acted accordingly.

"Having fought him directly, I now understand what you meant."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

Yeniel asked, and Evan responded with a smile.

"Just take a break. But that doesn't mean I've given up on the top position. I'll still aim for it."

The fight with Rudy hadn't changed Evan significantly.

He changed just a little.

His problems were far from resolved.

He still didn't know where to go or what goals to pursue.

However, Evan felt relieved.

For someone like him who had never discussed his concerns or himself with anyone, the fight and conversation with Rudy lightened his heart.

It felt like a festering inflammation had finally been drained.

"You've changed a bit."

Yeniel noticed this too.

The change in Evan's expression was evident.

And now.

Evan stood in front of the hospital room where Rudy Astria was, holding a fruit basket.

He thought of apologizing since he was the one who injured Rudy, but since Evan himself was injured by Rudy, he felt no need to apologize.

The reason Evan wasn't hospitalized despite being injured was because most of his injuries were internal.

Compared to external injuries, there wasn't much the hospital could do for internal injuries.

If his organs were damaged, medication would suffice, and mana would naturally recover over time.

After some contemplation, Evan prepared to enter.

“Ahem…”

He cleared his throat and raised his hand to knock.

“You idiot!!!”

At that moment, a loud voice came from inside the room.

Evan frowned and opened the door.

“Rie! Rudy is a patient!!”

“Better to ask us to stay around! Idiot!!”

“No, I thought that’s what would happen!”

“How pathetic, senior.”

Rudy was sitting up in bed, leaning back.

In front of him, Rie was furiously pacing, Luna was trying to calm her down, and Yuni was laughing at Rudy.

“Rudy Astria?”

Evan, seeing this, called Rudy's name.

Everyone's eyes then turned to Evan.

“…Evan?”

They all looked at Evan with puzzled expressions.

However, Rudy looked at the fruit basket in Evan's hand and smiled.

"Are you here for a visit?"

“…Yes, though it seems at a bad time."

"No! You came at a good time."

At that, Rie glared at Rudy sharply.

Rudy ignored Rie's scorching gaze and reached out towards the front of the bed.

"If you've come for a visit, sit down."

Evan placed the basket in a corner of the room and sat down on a chair.

"It looks like everyone is close."

Rudy glanced at Rie and commented.

"You seem to be in good condition."

"I received a lot of healing magic before arriving at the hospital, so there wasn't much to treat."

Rudy shrugged with a subtle expression.

"Leaving that aside."

Rudy stared intently at Evan.

"Have you sorted out your thoughts?"

"Somewhat. I don't know where to go yet, but I've realized what I shouldn't do."

Evan spoke, seemingly relieved, and Rudy seemed satisfied.

"Your expression looks much better than before."

"Does it?"

Evan's face now had more variety.

Different from before, when his face seemed to carry the weight of the world's worries, casting a shadow over it.

There was more diversity in his expressions, and the dark circles under his eyes had diminished.

The changes were a result of his worries fading and him sleeping better.

Evan briefly chatted and then stood up from his seat.

"Since you seem alright, I should leave."

Evan had come to offer condolences since Rudy had lost the first place to Yeniel.

Seeing that Rudy's expression didn't seem too bad despite losing first place, Evan felt there was no reason to stay.

"Ah, Evan. Take this."

As Evan was about to leave, Rudy handed him an envelope that was nearby.

“…What's this?"

"Open it in your room alone. Don't talk about its contents with anyone else."

Evan looked at the envelope with curiosity.

Seeing his expression, Rudy waved his hand a few times.

"It's nothing big. Just a small favor."

Evan narrowed his eyes and looked at Rudy.

"Alright. If it's not too difficult, I'll consider it."

"Good, try to accept it if possible. It'll be a big help to everyone."

Evan nodded at Rudy's words, then left the hospital room.

Returning to his room, Evan stared intently at the envelope Rudy had handed him.

He took out a letter opener and carefully opened the envelope.

Inside was a paper that resembled a letter.

Evan took out the paper and skimmed through its contents.

“…What?"

Evan looked at the contents in disbelief.

The message written on the paper:

Rudy was planning to target the Rebels.

“…He says this isn't a big deal?"

Evan uttered to himself in disbelief.

There was a man walking down the street, his hood up, scanning his surroundings.

"Hey! Don't run!"

Nearby, three or four children were playing, and a woman, who seemed to be their mother, was scolding them.

"Hey, you there!"

"Hahaha! Try and catch me!"

The children ran around without looking ahead.

"Ah!"

One of the children, running forward, bumped into the man.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

The children's mother, seeing her child bump into the man, quickly rushed over.

As she apologized and looked up at the man's face.

“…Gasp."

She gasped upon recognizing him.

The man was Aryandor, the leader of the Rebels.

Even a common woman knew his face due to the widespread wanted posters from the Empire.

This area was under Rebel control.

To these people, the leader of the Rebels was like the Emperor himself.

An untouchable figure.

"I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

The mother was at a loss for words, unsure of how to act.

'The leader of the Rebels is said to be a ruthless being.'

That was the impression given by the wanted posters distributed by the Empire.

Unforgiving and cruel, someone to flee from at first sight.

Aryandor didn't respond but reached out to the child.

"Please, just spare my child…!"

Just as the mother was about to scream,

"Look ahead when you walk. It's dangerous to run like that."

Aryandor said, smiling and helping the child up.

He then dusted off the dirt from the child's clothes.

The mother watched in disbelief.

"Are… are you okay…?"

"It's normal for kids to run around and bump into things. I'm fine."

Aryandor looked at the child.

"The child seems to be a bit hurt from the fall, so go to the Rebels and ask for medicinal herbs. They will give you some."

The mother's eyes welled up with tears upon hearing this.

Before the Rebels took over this territory, there had been many stories of children clashing with the nobles.

Even for minor accidents, the nobles had imposed harsh punishments on children.

Yet here was Aryandor, lifting the child himself and offering medicine.

"Th-thank you."

"No need to thank me. It's just the right thing to do."

Aryandor smiled and said.

"Leader."

Then, a girl approached from behind.

Dressed like a witch, with a pointed hat and carrying a staff, it was Jefrin.

"What is it?"

Jefrin spoke quietly.

"A letter has arrived from Evan."

Aryandor's expression hardened.

“…Let's go back and talk about it."

As Aryandor moved to leave, the mother bowed respectfully.

"Thank you!"

Aryandor simply smiled in response.

Jefrin watched Aryandor with a curious tilt of her* head.

"Who is that person?"

"Just a commoner. Speaking of which, it seems there's a lack of space for children to

play. They could get hit by carriages if they play in the streets like this. Tell them to create a separate play area."

Hearing Aryandor's words, Jefrin nodded.

Such orders weren't unusual, so she didn't react much.

"So, what's this about a letter from Evan?"

"He's under suspicion. He's asking us to come and get him."

"Come and get him?"

"It's difficult for him to escape the academy's scrutiny."

At Jefrin's words, Aryandor furrowed his brow.

"What do you plan to do?"

In the past, Aryandor would have looked into the future upon hearing such news.

However, he could no longer use that ability.

Even when Aryandor saw the future, events never unfolded as predicted, especially when it involved the academy.

Among all the futures he had seen, Evan was the most troubling.

Yet, the fact that Evan was willing to join the Rebels was too good an opportunity to pass up.

That's why it felt so unsettling.

"How many assassins do we have available?"

"Only three or four."

"Send only them."

"Just the assassins?"

Assassins were good at hiding but not particularly strong.

If someone powerful from the academy pursued Evan, they wouldn't be able to shake them off.

"Isn't this a great opportunity? Shouldn't we send someone more capable?"

"It's dangerous."

"If it's dangerous, shouldn't we send stronger people?"

Despite her argument, Aryandor showed little reaction.

Jefrin bit her lip, then tapped her chest.

"Then I will go."

"You? Going there?"

"If someone pursues us, I can use illusion magic to lose them. There shouldn't be any problems."

Aryandor found it odd that Jefrin was so eager to go.

She was usually indifferent to her surroundings, focusing solely on her magic research.

Yet, here she was, insisting on going herself.

Aryandor didn't understand but decided to respect her wish.

"If that's what you want, do so. However, you'll be responsible for your actions."

At Aryandor's words, Jefrin smiled.

"Understood."

CHAPTER 196
JEFRIN (2)

Everyone in the student council room was busily moving about.

Kuhn and Emily were transferring documents, while Rie worked quickly with her hands.

Even students who weren't part of the student council were helping out.

The reason for this hustle and bustle was the approaching end of the semester.

After the final exams, there's a transition period before the new student council takes over.

At Liberion Academy, the student council's term always ended with the final exams.

To avoid handing over a pile of unfinished work to the next council, they had to get ahead on tasks during this transition period.

So, the student council was swamped with an avalanche of tasks.

Starting from various odd jobs to managing dormitory facilities, and preparing the handover for the next council.

There was a mountain of work to be done.

"Maybe it would be better to work during the winter break instead,"

Kuhn mumbled, a sentiment everyone agreed with.

But agreement didn't mean slowing down.

There wasn't even time to discuss it.

At that moment, Yuni entered the student council room.

"Did you call me?"

"Yuni, you're here!"

Rie's face brightened up.

She had asked for her help, seeing that Yuni had been rather idle lately.

"Thanks, Yuni."

"Oh, it's nothing if you asks."

"Then, could you help with these tasks?"

Yuni took the documents from Rie and looked around.

“…But where's Rudy?"

At Yuni's question, Rie flinched slightly.

"Rudy has other tasks, so he's somewhere else right now."

"Busy? What's he busy with?"

Yuni's question made Rie glance around.

With so many people in the student council room, it was hard to speak freely.

"He's preparing something else."

Rie spoke vaguely.

Yuni put down the documents on the desk.

"Then wouldn't Rudy also be busy? Is there anyone else helping him?"

"Don't worry. It's a task the professors agreed to help with."

Rie reassured her, sending Yuni a subtle look.

Something was off.

Yuni had never shown such concern for someone else.

Rie had felt this strangeness in Yuni since the joint assessment.

An unusual kindness, uncharacteristic of Yuni.

While typically indifferent to others, she showed particular interest in Rudy.

It was too strange to ignore.

Yuni's change coincided perfectly with certain events.

She was comforted by Rudy during the individual assessment and rescued by him during the joint assessment.

Though Rie didn't know the details, the situations didn't seem promising.

Given Rudy's past actions, suspicion was warranted.

'Could it be that Yuni… has feelings for Rudy?'

Rie looked at Yuni doubtfully.

Of course, the relationship between Yuni and Rudy hadn't changed much.

From the beginning, Yuni always followed Rudy around, and her attitude towards him hadn't changed much either.

Despite her doubts, Rie couldn't let her guard down.

Already feeling uneasy, Rie was busy in her own right, and so was Rudy.

Amidst this, there were major obstacles like Luna and Astina.

Luna, not being as busy as the vice president Rie, could meet Rudy whenever he was free.

Same with Astina, but Rudy was too occupied to spare time.

Since becoming second-year students, they hadn't hung out leisurely.

Busy schedules and Rie's constant monitoring of Luna prevented it.

Fortunately, Astina hadn't shown much activity.

She wasn't particularly busy.

Though she had family duties, her father was handling them.

Astina focused solely on training.

Rie found it odd that Astina, who usually took the opportunity to approach Rudy during busy times, showed no such movements now.

Despite constant surveillance by elementals, Astina just shuttled between the dormitory and the training ground.

This focus allowed Rie to concentrate on student council work, but the current situation was problematic.

Yuni, who had only just grown close to her at the academy, showing interest in the man Rie liked?

This could become more intense than fighting for the Royal throne.

Yuni had some interest in the throne but lacked passion.

If Yuni truly fell for Rudy, she would be unpredictable.

Yuni had never been so focused or dedicated to anything.

With no particular likes or hobbies, what if she genuinely desired something?

The thought was unbearable for Rie.

The idea of someone who never gambled getting addicted once they started was similar to how Yuni might behave.

"?"

Lost in her thoughts, Rie was brought back by Yuni's curious gaze.

"So, where's Rudy now?"

Exhaling deeply, Rie beckoned Yuni closer.

Yuni approached, and Rie whispered softly.

"Rudy isn't at the academy right now, so you can't see him."

"Not at the academy…!"

As Yuni reacted loudly, Rie quickly covered her mouth.

"It's confidential. Shh."

“…Okay."

"Ah… Also…”

Rie almost asked what Yuni thought about Rudy but held back.

"Never mind."

"Huh?"

Unable to ask, Rie was suddenly pulled by Yuni.

"What's going on? Why did you stop talking?"

"No, it's nothing. Oh, right. You seemed to be hiding something about Rudy and me. What was it?"

Rie quickly changed the topic.

"Oh, that? I had made a bet involving you."

“…Me?"

"Yes, we bet on who would win you, but it ended in a draw."

Yuni ranked second in the joint assessment.

She ended up with the same rank as Rudy.

The top spot for the first year was narrowly claimed by Kuhn.

The bet with Rudy ended up being nullified, just as they had discussed initially.

"So, I get to be here with my sister like this~."

Yuni smiled as she looked at Rie.

Seeing her smile, Rie couldn't help but smile too.

"Um… Rie, sorry to interrupt this warm moment, but…"

Then Kuhn cautiously spoke up.

"There's a lot of work pending… You need to hurry. There are documents that need to be submitted today…"

"Sigh… Alright."

Rie refocused on the paperwork, and Yuni continued reading the documents she was given.

While reading, Yuni hummed a tune and muttered to herself, barely audible.

"I wonder where Rudy is~."

In a dark space.

There, Jefrin and a few others were gathered.

"In a week, we head to the academy."

Jefrin was preparing a group of assassins for their mission.

"Our task is to bring a student from the academy to this place. It's not particularly difficult. However, since the student is well-known at the academy, we might be interupted."

Jefrin tapped the floor with the staff in her hand as she walked.

"Our mission is to bring that person here, so let's focus on that."

Jefrin also distributed a few more documents.

These documents listed important figures at the academy.

"Fortunately, the principal is currently unwell, and the vice-principal will be traveling to the capital tomorrow. So, we don't need to worry much."

This information had come in a few days ago.

Responding to the Emperor's call, Vice-Principal Cromwell was heading to the capital.

The reason was a major meeting concerning internal affairs of the empire.

There was a significant internal division within the empire.

The Royal Chancellor Ophillius was strongly opposing the Astria Duke family.

It was almost time for Rie and Rudy's graduation.

A period when the successors to the Emperor's throne and the Duke's position could be determined.

All eyes were on the Astria Duke family.

There were questions about whether Ian was the right successor to the Astria Duke family.

While the head of a family usually decides on the successor, it wasn't entirely up to them.

The successor needed the agreement of the family's vassal houses and the Emperor's

approval.

However, such matters were typically routine, and no one paid much attention.

Nobody opposed unless something utterly nonsensical happened.

Meanwhile, the Royal Chancellor Ophillius was discussing whether Ian was suitable for the position in the Duke's family.

Specifically, it was about giving Rudy a chance to compete for the empire's sake.

Rudy had been consistently showing remarkable achievements, and Ophillius argued that it made no sense to simply hand over the successor's position to Ian without considering Rudy.

This had led to a state of unrest in the empire.

While the division within the empire was beneficial for the rebels, in some ways, it was not good.

The mana stones used by the rebels mostly came from necromancers who were protected by the Astria family.

To continue receiving a stable supply of mana stones, Rudy should not inherit the Astria family.

However, for now, these circumstances were more advantageous.

With attention focused on the capital, it was easier to capture Evan.

"We will hide in the city near the academy and contact Evan. Then, we will escape to the forest in front and ride horses hidden there to another city."

Jefrin slowly laid out the plan and adjusted her hat.

"The operation begins in a week. Everyone, be ready by then."

"Understood."

After all the explanations, the assassins present left the room.

As the assassins left, Jefrin, looking tired, sat down in a nearby chair.

"Ugh…"

As she sat down, Jefrin expressed pain.

She clutched her heart and started gasping for breath.

A few minutes later, her breathing returned to normal.

However, there was something slightly odd.

Jefrin's hand had transformed into that of an old person, wrinkled and aged.

"This damned body… acting up again."

Jefrin stared at her hand and spoke.

She stood up and opened a drawer.

Inside the drawer were numerous potions.

She took one out and poured it into her mouth.

Jefrin's hand returned to that of a young girl.

"How long can I last like this?"

She muttered despairingly, but she had no intention of collapsing easily.

She had to persevere and survive until she obtained the research on immortality conducted by Levian.

To do so, she needed the leader of the rebels, Aryandor, and that was why Jefrin was cooperating with the rebels.

CHAPTER 197
JEFRIN (3)

I was outside the academy.

Despite being busy with student council work, there was a reason I was here.

"That's not how you do it."

"Isn't this close enough?"

"No, not at all. Do it again."

The person admonishing me was Serina.

Priscilla placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Do your best."

Should it be considered a wolf's hand or paw?

It felt odd to be comforted by a wolf.

I was currently learning about elemental magic.

After the joint assessment, I had consulted with Cromwell.

The plan was to collaborate with Evan and draw in the rebels.

It was a strategy to diminish the power of the rebels.

However, Cromwell's absence from the academy was a problem.

He had gone to the capital for a meeting.

Originally, McDowell should have attended the meeting, but due to his condition,

Cromwell went instead.

Cromwell and I had looked for a professor who could help us.

Someone knowledgeable about the rebels and capable of facing them.

The ideal person for such a task was Robert, but he was not currently at the academy.

He had taken a leave of absence for this semester.

Thus, the person I sought help from was Professor Mcguire.

With Cromwell heading to the capital, Mcguire, who was at a conference, returned to the academy.

The academy had a rule that a certain number of professors couldn't be away simultaneously.

If too many professors took leave or went on business trips, some of those who were out had to return.

Having too few professors in the academy posed a security risk and burdened the remaining faculty with work.

I couldn't expect much help from Mcguire.

Being a research-oriented professor specialized in magical tools, he could only provide support with magical tools and was not capable of direct combat.

Research professors lacked both the physical endurance and experience in combat, performing worse in battle than Astina or me.

I had thought about asking Gracie for help, but Cromwell strongly opposed it.

Gracie was already in poor condition due to the midterm incident, so asking for her assistance was a bad idea.

Cromwell promised to return as soon as possible, but I couldn't rely solely on that.

Still, what had happened had happened.

I had to find a solution to the problem.

I wasn't sure who the rebels would send, but since they were attempting to recruit students directly from the academy, it was likely to be a formidable opponent.

So, I sent a letter to Astina.

Originally, I wanted to meet her in person, but she declined the meeting.

Not knowing the reason, I had no choice but to send a letter.

Astina readily accepted my request.

The next thing I did was to seek out Rie.

I entrusted the student council work to her and explained my situation in detail.

"Can I get some help from Serina?"

With dark magic, the current situation was a bit tricky.

I can't expect quick growth in magic within a short amount of time.

So, I chose elemental magic.

I had never properly learned elemental magic, so even a little learning could lead to significant growth compared to other skills.

"It's been a while, Rudy Astria. I've heard from Princess Rie."

That's how I came to meet Serina.

Dressed in black, befitting her royal secret service role, and her blue hair neatly tied up, she had changed much since the last time I saw her.

Initially, her impression was good.

Even though she once tried to kill me, she seemed different now.

She had even saved Luna and me, so there was no reason for me to dislike her.

However.

"Hmm… That's not how it's done."

Serina was not a good teacher.

"Think of it as handling mana. It's not Priscilla taking it directly from you, but you passing it to Priscilla."

"So… how do I do that…"

Already tired from continually using Priscilla, Serina's nagging was giving me a headache.

What exactly is mental strength, and how am I supposed to use it like mana?

Serina explained the method she learned from her mother.

The most efficient way to use Priscilla was not for her to draw out my energy, but for me to share it with her.

Even hearing this, I couldn't understand.

Priscilla is an elemental controlled using my mental strength.

To tell me to share my energy with Priscilla meant dividing my mental strength.

Can a person's mind be divided and shared like that?

Mental strength wasn't an energy I could handle like mana, and I had never felt it as an energy.

I merely relied on my senses and tried to do as Serina said, but it wasn't easy.

As I frowned, trying to figure it out on my own, Serina handed me a warm cup of tea.

"Let's take a break. This isn't something that gets better with more time."

"Yeah, thanks."

I took the tea from Serina and brought it to my lips.

"It'll be hard to do it in a week, as you said. Even my mother took a long time."

"Then, doing this will allow me to perfectly control Priscilla?"

"I'm not sure about perfectly. But you'll be able to control her enough to prevent a rampage."

"Not rampaging…"

That raised a question.

Why did Serina's mother pass away?

If she could control Priscilla to the extent of preventing a rampage, weren't there other ways?

As I harbored my doubts, Serina spoke first.

"My mother caused her own rampage."

I widened my eyes at Serina's words.

"She triggered it herself?"

To trigger a rampage meant she faced certain death by her own volition.

Who could she have possibly fought to be willing to face death?

Then Priscilla spoke.

"The opponent was incredibly powerful. She couldn't retreat, not with Serina behind her."

If Priscilla spoke so, it meant the opponent was indeed formidable.

I was curious.

"Who was the opponent?"

"I don't know… I only know that the opponent overwhelmed her with tremendous swordsmanship."

"Swordsmanship?"

"I've been investigating the incident lately."

Serina opened up.

"I found something about the last message left by my mother."

Serina pointed to a clock while speaking.

"Time. That was my mother's last message."

There was only one person that came to mind.

Aryandor, a wizard and swordmaster who wielded time magic.

As far as I knew, he was the only one who combined time and swordsmanship.

Serina must have been aware of this fact too.

"But I don't think the leader of the Rebels is the culprit."

"Because of the timing?"

"Yes, even considering appearance, it seems unlikely for someone of that age to possess such skills at that time. It doesn't quite add up."

The issue was the timing.

Serina's mother passed away about 10 years ago.

It was around the time Robert was exiled from the empire, and Levian fled.

Aryandor appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties.

So, 10 years ago, he would have been around my age.

Serina's mother was a royal elementalist, a formidable force that no one could ignore.

It would have been difficult for Aryandor to match her skills at that time.

Moreover, it would have been strange if he possessed such skills then.

That was when Ephomos fell apart, Levian disappeared, and there were almost no notable figures in the empire.

If Aryandor had killed Serina's mother, a royal elementalist, back then, he would have harbored resentment against the empire from that point.

It would have been odd not to form the Rebels then.

That was a time when many grew resentful of the empire.

The empire had swept through the lower classes, which was expected.

If he had resentment against the empire, finding like-minded allies and overthrowing the empire would have been easier then.

There was no reason to act now.

Therefore, the conclusion was one.

There exists someone else who can wield time magic besides Aryandor.

That reminds me, it was puzzling.

Where did Aryandor learn time magic from?

Time magic couldn't have just appeared out of nowhere.

The biggest question was, if time magic already existed, why didn't the empire know about it?

If there were such a powerful magic user, the empire wouldn't have just let it be.

They would have arranged for a good house, like the Astria family, to keep them close to the empire.

Time and space had that much value.

Then, I remembered someone.

The Saint.

The Saint could use dimensional magic that dealt with both time and space.

However, the Saint's dimensional magic fundamentally differed from Astria's space magic and Aryandor's time magic.

Dimensional magic could not influence the current time and space.

It could only observe the future or other spaces.

Moreover, it was hard to consider the Saint, given the use of swordsmanship.

"My head hurts."

What was supposed to be a relaxing time became more complicated.

"I'll keep looking into it as much as I can, and if I find something out, I'll let you know," Serina said.

I nodded in agreement and resumed training in elemental magic.

"Please find my sister. Then I'll do anything."

Aryandor recalled the past.

His own impoverished and dying time.

It was after he was separated from his sister, who lived with him in the burning Ephomos.

Aryandor wandered the capital in search of his only family, his sister.

While wandering the capital, Aryandor met someone.

And Aryandor's life completely changed.

He learned time magic and swordsmanship from that person.

He became a swordsman with tremendous abilities.

"Become a being that changes the world. When you've changed the world, I'll come back to you."

Those were the last words of 'that person' who taught him magic.

Aryandor parted ways without knowing that person's face, identity, or anything else.

He only left with a few names and the promise to come back later.

The list that person handed to Aryandor was said to contain individuals necessary to change the world, and Aryandor set out to find them.

The first person he met was Jefrin.

Jefrin was regarded as a great wizard of the empire, comparable to the grand wizard Levian of the same era.

Such a wizard was dying old and sick on the outskirts of the empire.

The empire had abandoned Jefrin.

In her youth, she was provided with great treatment and environment, but as she aged and fell ill, Jefrin was exiled to the outskirts.

There was no one to care for Jefrin.

Lying on an old bed, Jefrin said,

"I need to… surpass him… somehow surpass Levian…”

Jefrin was consumed by feelings of inferiority and hatred.

As a wizard born in the same era as Levian, she felt inferior, and she despised the empire that had abandoned her.

Aryandor reached out to her.

He granted her youth with time magic and delayed her illness with various potions.

However, time magic was not omnipotent.

Changing her appearance did not mean her insides were altered too.

Jefrin was dying.

There wasn't much time left.

To survive, Jefrin needed the magic of eternal life that Levian had researched.

Thus, Jefrin began to help Aryandor, seeking to acquire Levian's magic hidden somewhere in the empire and to bring down the empire she loathed.

"Leader."

While contemplating these thoughts, Jefrin entered Aryandor's room.

"I'm leaving now."

Aryandor looked at Jefrin.

"Take care."

"Understood."

CHAPTER 198
JEFRIN (4)

Jefrin was always plagued by a sense of inferiority.

It was because Levian, another royal wizard, was always beside him.

If Jefrin was a genius born once in a hundred years, Levian was a once-in-a-thousand-years prodigy.

No matter how hard he struggled, Jefrin could never surpass Levian.

Even when others said Jefrin was on a similar level as Levian, it only disgusted him.

Levian and Jefrin were not on a level where comparison was possible.

Jefrin knew this better than anyone.

Yet, he kept trying.

To surpass Levian, to reach his achievements.

His inferiority complex drove Jefrin to grow.

He stayed up nights researching, producing numerous research achievements.

Thus, he became a great wizard revered by the empire's wizards.

However, as he continued to burn the midnight oil and push his body to the limits, it was inevitable that he wouldn't remain healthy.

Jefrin started to fall ill with various diseases, and as he aged, his condition progressively worsened.

Just as Jefrin's health began to deteriorate, Levian disappeared.

Neither the empire, Jefrin, nor anyone else knew why Levian had vanished.

With Levian gone, Jefrin took the top position as the royal wizard.

There was no longer anyone among the royal wizards who could be compared to Jefrin.

When such a situation finally arrived, it felt utterly hollow.

He had always strived to surpass Levian, but in the end, he didn't surpass him with his own abilities but reached his position for other reasons.

After Levian's disappearance, Jefrin's health continued to decline.

He could barely use magic properly, and even getting up became difficult.

As his condition worsened, the empire suggested he retire.

Given Jefrin's physical state, he couldn't even continue his research, let alone other duties, so he was advised to await death comfortably in the outskirts of the empire.

It was essentially an exile.

Jefrin could not object to this.

He had no one around him.

Not a single student, which any skilled wizard was supposed to have, nor any family member.

Jefrin had always lived for himself, focusing solely on his growth.

Therefore, when he became old and sick, there was no one around to speak for him.

Jefrin was sent away to the outskirts of the empire without a word.

Beside him, he only had the great fortune he had amassed during his time as a royal wizard.

But he couldn't use the money properly.

Jefrin, always absorbed in his research, didn't know how to indulge in luxury.

He just bought a small cabin on the outskirts of the empire and hired someone to take care of his illness.

Jefrin, unlike the end befitting a great wizard, died alone and forlorn in the outskirts of the empire.

As he was about to face his end, Jefrin encountered Aryandor.

When Jefrin met him, Aryandor was just a teenager in his late teens.

It was Aryandor who saved his life.

He rejuvenated Jefrin's aging body with time magic, a spell Jefrin had never seen in his life.

However, Jefrin was not completely revived.

He regained his younger body, but was still afflicted with various illnesses.

Additionally, the state of his mana remained unchanged.

Though he appeared younger on the outside, the condition of his insides could not defy his age.

Jefrin's life was briefly extended, but he couldn't solve the fundamental problem.

It was then that Jefrin learned about the magic of immortality, which necromancers and Levian had been researching.

Hearing about this magic sparked various thoughts in him.

Could he surpass Levian if he continued to live?

He could achieve the lifelong goal he had held.

Jefrin felt hope.

Thus, he joined the Rebels.

He helped Aryandor, who had saved him, striving to continue living.

However, as time passed, Jefrin began to give up on his goal.

The magic that promised eternal life turned out to be nothing but an illusion.

The research was incomplete, and Levian, who had been conducting it, had disappeared, causing the flame of hope to slowly extinguish.

So, Jefrin changed his goal.

He decided to give his all to the Rebels.

To help Aryandor until his death.

It was during this resolve that he met Evan.

Evan, steeped in inferiority and seemingly on the verge of breaking at the slightest touch, reminded Jefrin of himself.

Jefrin felt a sense of kinship.

He had looked at the world through similar eyes as Evan since his youth.

That's why he tried to bring Evan into the Rebels.

It was merely out of sympathy.

Jefrin thought if he had met Aryandor a little earlier, instead of trying to surpass Levian, he could have had a different goal and his life would be different now.

He intended to give Evan a new purpose, not to lead him down the same path as himself.

Jefrin dismounted his horse and spoke to the assassins beside him.

"We're almost there. We've agreed to meet at the cabin near the forest. Hide nearby."

"Understood."

Jefrin flipped his hood over his face to conceal it.

The assassins dispersed into the surroundings, hiding their presence, and Jefrin slowly walked towards the cabin ahead.

Inside the cabin was Evan.

Like Jefrin, Evan was also wearing his hood.

"It's been a while, Evan."

"It has been a while."

"Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"Fortunately, I was able to escape unnoticed."

Students couldn't leave the academy at night unless it was for family or clan matters.

Therefore, Jefrin had forged documents in advance and sent them to the academy, facilitating Evan's escape at night.

Thanks to that, Evan was able to leave easily.

"Then, let's get moving."

"Understood."

As Jefrin and Evan were about to leave the cabin, Evan's hood was slightly lifted, revealing his eyes.

"…?"

A firm gaze.

These were not the eyes Jefrin had seen when he first met Evan.

They were not filled with despair and inferiority, but were just ordinary, steady eyes.

"Wait a moment."

Jefrin reached out his hand towards Evan.

"First, I need to confirm if it's really you. Take off that hood."

At Jefrin's request, Evan frowned.

He was puzzled by this sudden demand.

Wondering if taking off the hood would cause any significant trouble, Evan flipped it back.

“…What?"

This Evan looked completely different from the last time Jefrin had seen him.

There was no trace of the despair-ridden, motivation-less feeling or the eyes filled with anger due to inferiority.

Instead, they looked perfectly ordinary.

'Did I see him wrong that time?'

That seemed impossible.

Even if his current physical state wasn't normal, he wouldn't make such a mistake.

So, were the eyes he saw back then an act?

That didn't make sense either.

The eyes of Evan he had seen before couldn't be faked.

They were fundamentally different, something that couldn't be found in an ordinary person.

Jefrin asked,

"Who are you?"

“…What do you mean by that?"

Evan expressed his confusion at Jefrin's words.

His appearance hadn't changed; he was still himself.

He couldn't understand the intent behind Jefrin's question.

Jefrin quickly judged the situation.

Was there a reason to take this now-ordinary-looking Evan with him?

In terms of ability, Evan was a guy Aryandor had to be wary of, so there was no need for suspicion there.

But, could this guy betray the Rebels?

Could he truly become one with the Rebels?

That was a different matter.

The Rebels were a group of somewhat broken individuals.

They lacked or missed something that normal people didn't.

That's what allowed them to do anything for their cause.

Even things that ordinary people couldn't imagine, they could do without hesitation.

'I was foolish.'

He had felt a sense of kinship after briefly seeing Evan and made a foolish decision.

Evan was described as a great threat by Aryandor.

Instead of trying to recruit Evan as an ally, Jefrin should have come to kill him.

That would have been the right decision.

He felt pathetic for feeling a sense of kinship based on one encounter and trying to

take him in as an ally.

Taking this guy with him could only lead to a high chance of betrayal.

An ordinary person would not just stand by after seeing the actions of the Rebels.

It would only endanger them.

Nevertheless, Evan was a capable individual, so Jefrin knew he had to kill him right there.

There was no reason to leave a potential future problem unresolved.

"Evan, I'm sorry to have called you out here, but this is where it ends."

Jefrin started to mobilize his mana.

Evan's eyes widened at this.

“Gasp…!”

Quickly, Evan drew his sword from his waist.

Boom!

As soon as Evan drew his sword, a huge explosion occurred.

The cabin shattered into pieces under the force of Jefrin's magic.

“Ugh… what’s happening, all of a sudden…?”

Evan emerged from the explosion.

He hadn't done anything that could have been perceived as betrayal.

Yet, the sudden attack left him no time to react.

Already at a disadvantage without his original sword, which had been destroyed in the joint assessment, Evan suffered burns on his arm, unable to use its magic-nullifying ability.

“He's still not down.”

Jefrin slowly emerged from the rubble of the destroyed cabin, a fierce killing intent swirling in his eyes.

“Why are you doing this all of a sudden?”

“It’s simply because you’ve become useless.”

Evan glared at Jefrin.

The last time he saw him, Jefrin had seemed almost childlike.

His actions were light, but now, he was completely different.

Although the face under the hood looked like a girl, the eyes were empty.

They were the eyes of someone who had been through dozens of battlefields.

“Cough…”

Jefrin, approaching Evan as if to kill him, suddenly clutched his heart.

“Again, this…”

‘This is my chance… ’

Evan, clutching his burned arm, turned and ran.

“Catch him.”

Though it was a faint voice, the assassins responded and moved.

They began to chase after Evan.

Evan, fleeing from the assassins, used magic.

“Nature's Healing…!”

Fortunately, the cabin had been in the woods.

Blue light emanated from the trees in the forest, converging on Evan.

The light gradually began to heal his arm.

“Cough…”

However, Evan was still not fully recovered from his internal injuries.

Before his arm was completely healed, his mana refused to cooperate.

Pain as if his intestines were twisted assaulted him.

But he couldn’t stop; standing still meant certain death.

Although things hadn't gone as planned, escaping the area was his priority.

As he ran, he lost sight of the assassins and Jefrin.

“Are they hiding?”

Under normal circumstances, he might have used the mana of the forest to locate them, but he couldn’t afford to do that now.

Unless it was to block an attack, using mana felt too risky.

“Evan.”

Just then, a voice called out.

“…Rudy Astria!”

A blonde man emerged in the distance, revealing himself.

It was Rudy Astria.

Seeing him, Evan stopped in his tracks.

"It's serious, Rudy Astria. Jefrin suddenly attacked me."

Evan quickly explained the situation.

However, Rudy, without saying a word, walked towards him.

Evan felt something was off.

“…Rudy Astria?"

He scrutinized the figure before him.

There was a sense of discordance about it.

Evan swiftly raised his sword.

“…An illusion?"

The figure was unmistakably Rudy Astria, but it lacked Rudy's distinctive aura.

Despite wearing gloves on his hands and the same attire Evan had seen earlier, something about him didn't feel quite right.

Especially the way he moved, stepping silently and cautiously, resembled the gait of an assassin.

Evan recognized this manner of walking, as it was similar to how Yeniel moved.

The assassin disguised as Rudy Astria pulled out a dagger and threw it at Evan.

Evan deflected the dagger with his sword and started running again.

‘Are they showing me a figure that I would feel safe around?’

The applications of illusion magic are endless.

It can make the caster appear as anything they desire or show different figures to different observers.

First, he needed to get away.

The plan he had made with Rudy was to attack when they were relaxed and mounted on their horses.

Since an explosion had just occurred, they would surely come this way.

Evan needed time until Rudy arrived.

So, he ran.

He ran to buy time.

A few minutes into his run, something felt off.

He kept feeling like he was going in circles.

'Is this also illusion magic…? Did they cast it over the entire forest?'

Continuously seeing the same surroundings, his sense of direction became vague.

It was hard to tell whether he was really going in circles or just imagining it.

"Ugh…"

He needed to break the illusion.

Evan tried to recalibrate his disoriented sense of direction by manipulating mana.

"Evan."

"Evan."

"Evan."

Before he could use the magic, he saw around a dozen figures of Rudy Astria around him.

'Is this also an illusion…? Or is it making the assassins appear differently?'

The confusion compounded, further disorienting Evan.

"Evan… You must die."

"Evan, you're not needed."

Figures with Rudy Astria's face uttered strange words as they walked towards him.

“Ha…”

Evan let out a laugh at the sight.

"You guys have got it all wrong."

Seeing the face now, Rudy Astria's was indeed the most comforting to Evan.

But that didn’t mean Evan would be deeply hurt by hearing such words from Rudy Astria.

Having realized something during the joint assessment, Evan decided to break away from Rudy Astria and follow his own path.

Evan, determined to walk his own way, wouldn't be provoked if the real Rudy Astria said such things.

Not being greatly influenced by Rudy Astria and finding his own goals was Evan's way.

'I'll just face them.'

Evan looked at his adversaries with steady eyes and calmly manipulated his mana.

He charged at the figures of Rudy Astria with his sword in hand.

He wielded the sword enveloped in mana gathered from the forest.

He cut down the figure of Rudy Astria.

“Huh?”

But, unlike before, the figure resembling Rudy Astria was not an assassin.

Even as Evan cut through them, they disappeared like smoke, with no sense of impact.

However, not all were illusions.

Among the several figures of Rudy Astria, daggers flew towards him.

Amidst the illusion, there were real threats.

“Ugh…”

Evan did his best to fend off the daggers while cutting down the Rudy Astria figures.

But he couldn't keep it up indefinitely.

Thump—

“Ugh.”

Pain inflicted by the mana coursed through his body.

His movements were being hindered.

Evan doubled over in agony.

The assassins didn't miss this opportunity.

As Evan was about to collapse, they rushed in.

“Ha…”

As Evan felt multiple pains and saw them rushing in, he lifted his head in resignation.

Looking up, someone was falling from the sky, also bearing Rudy Astria's face.

“This is the end……”

“Evan.”

The Rudy Astria figure falling from the sky called out his name.

“You held up well.”

“Huh?”

The Rudy Astria figure from the sky moved his mana.

“Finger of the Demon.”

CHAPTER 199
JEFRIN (5)

"Rudy, have you been well all this time?"

"Why don't you show your face more often? What have you been up to recently?"

"I've just been training alone."

10 minutes before Jefrin arrived.

I met with Astina.

It was a bit late for our meeting, but since there wasn't anything to prepare beforehand, it didn't really matter.

We hid atop a tree and chatted.

"You've heard about the plan, right?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't seem like much of a plan, actually."

Astina was right.

The real issue was luring the rebels here, not handling them, unless Aryandor himself showed up.

This place was a city right in front of the academy.

There were more than enough people to call for help.

So, having successfully drawn in the enemy, it was as if everything was already over.

"But lately, you seem a bit off."

“…Me?"

"Yes, I've been wanting to ask you…”

Boom—

That's when a massive explosion occurred.

I abruptly stood up from my seat.

The explosion had happened at the cabin where Evan and the rebels were supposed to meet.

This was no time for idle chat.

"Astina!"

"I know. Gravity."

Astina immediately manipulated her mana to lift both herself and me into the air, speeding towards the location.

Arriving near the cabin, all we saw were its charred remains.

"What happened here?"

"I'm not sure, but let's see."

I looked towards the forest.

It couldn't have been Evan who caused the explosion.

Knowing we were at a distance, he wouldn't do something so reckless.

Especially since he was already injured.

"Did the rebels attack first?"

I couldn't be sure of the reason, but looking towards the front of the forest, I could guess who had come.

There lay a magical device.

Its appearance was similar to the devices used by the rebels when they attacked the academy.

So, the visitor's identity was somewhat apparent.

"Jefrin?"

Such stationary magical devices needed precise coordinates to be set up, not something just anyone could do.

Of the rebel leaders we knew, only Jefrin had the capability to use such devices.

Unless they had recruited new members, Jefrin was the only one who came to mind.

"We should look for Evan first."

Astina said so, ready to enter the forest.

I grabbed her arm.

"We can't. We don't know what might happen in the forest."

If there were already devices set up, it meant illusion magic was in play.

Entering recklessly could lead to unpredictable consequences.

"Let's look for Evan from the sky."

"From the sky?"

Astina tilted her head at my suggestion.

Searching for someone on the ground from above the trees seemed like a nonsensical idea.

I was well aware of that.

But that was when searching with the naked eye.

I had another method.

"There's no time to explain."

“…Understood."

Astina lifted me into the air again.

At the same time, I closed my eyes.

What I had practiced most was sensing the flow of mana.

When returning from the Railer family to the academy, Robert taught me to sense the flow of mana to overcome necromancy spells.

Robert never teaches anything frivolously.

He is a mentor who imparts truly necessary skills at the right time.

So, he must have believed this ability was crucial for me and taught it accordingly.

Since returning to the academy, I hadn't slacked off a single day and had honed this skill.

I read the overall flow of mana.

I couldn't discern distant spaces, but I could check for people under the trees.

Without hearing any sound.

Without seeing anything.

Mana moves.

I read its movement.

There were people there.

As I read the mana, something strange happened.

A strong mana reaction emerged from the west.

It wasn't coming from a person.

The trees were moving the mana.

Evan's magic.

A technique that draws mana from trees.

I quickly caught on.

I opened my eyes, which had been shut, and looked in the direction where I had sensed the mana.

Normally, Evan's power would have made the trees glow brilliantly, but there was no such sight.

I couldn't see it with the naked eye, but I definitely felt the movement of mana there.

“…Astina. Could you head west?"

"West?"

Astina changed her flying direction to the west.

Arriving where the mana had moved, I looked at Astina.

"I'll go down."

"What? I'll come down too."

"No, you can't. Just in case, it's better for Astina to stay outside. There's no benefit in us all entering an illusion spell together."

Although Astina was stronger and it might be better for her to go down, I couldn't stay in the air forever.

Astina staying behind to keep watch from above was the better option.

"Then, I'll be back."

"Rudy Astria."

Astina suddenly grabbed my arm.

Then she bit her lower lip.

"No, never mind. Take care and don't get hurt."

Holding onto me and not saying much, I tilted my head in confusion.

But it wasn't the time to pry, so I just nodded.

"I'll go."

Astina released the magic that was lifting me, and I fell downwards.

Entering the forest, I saw Evan surrounded by people.

"Hm?"

The people surrounding Evan all had my face.

"What's that about? It's unsettling."

I frowned and looked at Evan.

He seemed resigned, staring up at the sky.

"Evan."

I called out to him, then chuckled.

"You've held up well."

I moved my mana.

First, I needed to distract their attention.

"Finger of the Demon."

Black pillars fell from the sky.

The people below, hearing my voice, scattered around.

But spreading out didn't mean they could avoid all my magic.

Several of them, bearing my appearance, were hit directly by my magic and vanished like smoke.

"An illusion?"

That meant among those who dodged, there were illusions too.

It would have been more troublesome if all those below had been real people, but knowing they were illusions, there was less to fear.

"Rudy Astria…!"

"Stay hidden and don't move."

I barked at Evan and took a deep breath.

I focused.

I needed to distinguish between illusion and reality.

Perfect illusion magic is said to be indistinguishable from reality, but there was a crucial difference.

Among the visible people, the illusions had a faint flow of mana.

Illusions couldn't have the same mana as humans.

For an illusion to have as much mana as a human, the amount allocated would need to be immense.

Creating so many illusions was impossible.

"Two on the right… three on the left, one above."

I read the flow, pinpointed the number of people, and moved.

I didn't give away the fact that I could discern illusions.

I would take them all down before the enemy grasped the situation.

I dashed off the ground.

My movements were concise.

Only as much as needed.

Minimizing the number of attacks.

Thump—

I kicked off the ground.

"Ah."

"One down."

I struck one in the stomach, then moved my legs again.

"Two, three, four."

The enemies had no time to react.

No matter how much they relied on illusion magic, they were mere assassins.

Ordinary-level assassins.

Their way of fighting always involved exploiting gaps from outside their target's line of sight, so they couldn't grasp my direct movements.

"Last one."

"Ugh…!"

I took down the last one and stared at them intently.

Seeing them collapsed with my face was unsettling.

"I need to dispel this quickly."

I pulled out a small box from my pocket.

A magical device prepared by McGuire.

It was designed to dispel illusion magic.

McGuire, unable to help directly, had prepared devices to counter such situations.

A device to dispel illusions.

It was prepared to counter Jefrin.

I pushed the device towards them.

Their appearances began reverting back to normal.

I examined their faces.

"None here."

Jefrin was not among them.

I narrowed my brows and looked around.

There was no one who could be Jefrin in the vicinity.

Did he really just send these assassins?

It was unlikely that anyone other than Jefrin could cast such an illusion spell.

I looked at Evan.

"Evan, were these the only ones who came?"

Evan, gasping for breath, shook his head.

"No! Jefrin is still out there."

I nodded and immediately looked up to the sky.

"Astina! Look for any horses or carriages nearby!"

"Got it. I'll check."

"Evan, rest here. Priscilla."

I summoned Priscilla and spoke.

"I'm going after Jefrin."

Jefrin was hiding in one part of the forest.

"Ha… Ha…"

She could feel that the illusion spell she had cast on the assassins was being dispelled.

Jefrin realized that Rudy Astria and Astina had arrived near the cabin.

She had deliberately left the magical device there to find out if they were coming.

But it wasn't as if Jefrin could simply escape.

She looked at her hands.

They were becoming wrinkled and shriveled.

The spell Aryandor had cast on her was wearing off.

Aryandor had cast a time spell on Jefrin, but it was Jefrin's mana that maintained it.

As Jefrin's mana gradually depleted, her body returned to its original state.

Jefrin slumped to the ground.

Her physical strength was depleted, and her mana was unstable.

It was only a matter of time before she was captured.

"Ha… That was foolish."

Jefrin lamented.

It wasn't worth coming all this way just to bring back one person with whom she felt a sense of kinship.

With her physical condition already not good, she should have taken better care of himself.

'Regretting now won't change anything.'

Jefrin gritted her teeth.

Even if she had remained with the rebels, there wouldn't have been much she could do.

There's no reason to live if it's just about barely clinging to life.

'Better a meaningful death than such a worthless life.'

Jefrin pulled out a potion from her pocket and swallowed it.

Her hand returned to its original state.

With a fierce killing intent, Jefrin rose to her feet.

"I'll need at least one companion for the road."

CHAPTER 200
JEFRIN (6)

"Rudy, I think it's around here."

Priscilla lifted her head, sniffing the ground.

"Yeah, I can sense it too."

A strong flow of mana was in the vicinity.

Multiple spells were at work.

"Has she given up on fleeing?"

Then, Astina, who had been scouting from the sky, descended.

"There were no signs of a cart or horse nearby, and no other movements either."

"Thank you for your efforts."

We looked ahead.

A powerful mana was felt there.

It was so intense that anyone could feel it without even trying to sense the flow.

Priscilla looked at me and spoke.

"Rudy, are we going in?"

“…We have to."

I had already contacted the academy.

I wasn't sure how long they would take, but Gracie or McGuire would come here.

However, we couldn't wait for them.

We had to catch Jefrin quickly.

If she's entrenched here, someone might come to help him.

She was right in front of the enemy's base; it's impossible to escape alone without help.

It was one of two possibilities.

Either she was making a desperate last stand or waiting for someone's help.

I prepared for the worst-case scenario.

I didn't want to lose such a chance.

"Astina."

I looked at Astina.

"Let's go. We can't wait."

Astina, seemingly sharing my thoughts, didn't say much and started moving.

"Oh, wait a moment."

I stopped Astina in her tracks and extended my hand.

She looked at my hand, puzzled.

"What's this?"

"Hold it."

“…What?"

Astina's expression, which had been stoic until now, changed.

"Let's hold hands."

"Why hold hands?"

"To avoid confusing each other for the enemy if we enter the illusion spell. If we're holding hands, we won't get separated."

Astina cleared her throat and then tightly grasped my hand.

I felt the warmth from her hand.

She looked at our clasped hands and smiled.

"Your hand is bigger than I thought."

"Is it?"

I smiled at Astina and headed forward.

"Let's go in."

"Alright."

Together, we advanced towards the illusion magic, with Priscilla following behind.

As we stepped towards the magic's origin, the surroundings started to change.

The green leaves clinging to the trees began to wither, and the leaves disappeared.

The area grew darker than usual, and an eerie aura enveloped us.

Despite wearing plain clothes and a hood to cover our faces, it felt colder.

"An illusion spell?"

Astina seemed to feel the cold too, shivering slightly.

Seeing this, I held her hand even more firmly.

Our bodies were cold, but our hands shared warmth.

"Priscilla, how about you?"

"I'm a spirit, so I don't really feel things like cold."

It was hard to tell if the chill was real or part of the illusion.

"We might have to endure it for a while. It's better to save mana…"

If it's an illusion spell, using magic wouldn't warm our bodies as it manipulates sensations, possibly rendering it ineffective after a slight initial warmth.

It was better to conserve mana and quickly defeat the enemy.

"Yeah. Let's finish this quickly and get out."

Relying on the warmth of our hands, we walked forward.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, a stairway resembling an altar appeared ahead.

There sat a woman.

She wore a witch's pointed hat, sitting cross-legged.

She was a woman of mature beauty.

Different from the appearance I had seen before, but I could tell she was Jefrin.

"Welcome~. Did you have any trouble getting here?"

Jefrin waved at us with a seductive smile.

"There's nothing around to make it difficult."

"Oh? Weren't you cold? It must have been quite chilly."

Jefrin stood up.

"This space was created with the help of necromancers. It's not just ordinary cold. It's combined with several abilities."

I narrowed my eyes.

It was unclear whether this cold was due to a real drop in temperature or a sensation created by an illusion.

Even if I could determine it, it wouldn't make much difference.

Human sensations are not something we control but automatically and relatively judge.

Seeing Astina, who seemed to feel the cold more than I did, it was easy to tell.

To Astina, who hadn't experienced much cold, it seemed to feel intensely cold.

"Astina, let's finish this quickly."

"Right."

Astina raised her hand.

"Gravity."

The surrounding trees were uprooted, and stones erupted and floated in the air.

The stones and trees flew towards Jefrin.

"I haven't finished talking yet. You're quite rude, aren't you?"

Jefrin didn't lose her smile even as the trees and stones flew at her, just slightly twisting her body to dodge.

But she didn't completely avoid them.

A tree branch grazed Jefrin's cheek.

"Huh?"

Simultaneously, I felt a sting on my cheek.

I sensed something odd and touched my cheek.

“…Blood?"

I looked at the blood on my hand and then at Astina.

Blood was also flowing down her cheek.

"Astina! Stop!"

"Hmm?"

Astina stopped her magic at my call.

Various things flying towards Jefrin fell to the ground.

However, Astina's attacks had already happened several times.

"Ugh…”

Both Astina and I were wounded, bleeding.

The wounds on our bodies matched exactly with those on Jefrin's body.

Jefrin, wiping the blood from her cheek, spoke.

"You see, you should listen to the whole story."

"The same wounds are inflicted on us?"

The location of Jefrin's wounds matched ours.

This alone made the situation clear.

Our attacks were harming us as well.

It seemed like a spell crafted by Jefrin.

"If you want to kill me, you'll have to die too~."

Jefrin spoke leisurely.

"Or, freeze to death."

As Jefrin said this, the cold intensified.

The stronger cold made my body shiver.

"Ugh…"

As the cold grew more intense, Astina frowned.

Then Priscilla approached Astina's side.

Priscilla wrapped Astina in her warm fur.

Looking at Priscilla, she too bore wounds in the same locations as ours.

Even as a spirit, currently materialized, she could be wounded.

I looked at Astina.

Though shivering from the cold, her condition didn't seem too bad as she hadn't used much mana yet.

She was in a state fit for battle.

I pondered slowly.

There was a clear contradiction in Jefrin's words.

She imposed two choices on us: endure the cold or kill her and die together.

If I were here alone, I might not know what choice to make.

Conserving strength and securing victory would mean attacking Jefrin.

If all this were an illusion, attacking the opponent might break the illusion.

It could just be an action inducing fear, and she might be preparing another move.

First, the best way to understand the situation was to attack the opponent.

But, it looked like a trap.

What if these wounds and the cold were real?

What if Jefrin deliberately incited us to attack her?

Despite much deliberation, no clear answer emerged.

“…Forget it."

There was no reason to ponder this much.

Astina kept shivering in the cold, and by the time this situation ended, professors from the academy would arrive.

"Shall we just take a brute force approach?"

"What?"

"That altar… or rather, everything around here."

I smiled.

"Can you destroy it?"

I could distinctly feel the flow of mana here.

The mana flowing throughout this entire land.

The whole land was functioning like a magical device.

While it seemed plausible to think an illusion spell was at play here, I thought further.

Sensing mana flow isn’t just about feeling the mana.

It involves understanding the situation and the opponent.

The opponent is an illusionist.

An illusionist we have already faced once.

The effectiveness of an illusionist’s magic diminishes significantly after the first encounter.

So, there was a chance that Jefrin had set a trap.

The mana spread around wasn't due to the illusion magic but was actually utilizing the entire land as a magical device.

That's what I assumed.

But even if that wasn't the case, it didn't matter.

If this was an illusion spell, there would be a magical device at its center.

Destroying everything around would also destroy that device.

After a moment of contemplation, Astina nodded.

"Let's do as you say."

Astina moved her mana.

"Hoo…”

Rumble—

As Astina raised her hand, the surroundings reverberated.

The earth itself seemed to shift.

The ground began to split open, and the shockwaves reached the altar.

Whatever the opponent was planning, it didn't matter.

The fact that I had been contemplating was only about what to do after causing a commotion, not about breaking the current situation, which wasn't difficult.

With Astina's overwhelming power, she could suppress all other forces.

"…"

Jefrin's eyes widened as she watched the crumbling altar and splitting earth.

I looked at her and smiled.

"Hey, you gave us a choice, right?"

I shrugged.

"What will you do now? Will you try to stop us? Or just stand there and watch?"

CHAPTER 201
JEFRIN (7)

The altar crumbled and the ground around it split open.

"Huh…”

Jefrin looked on with a disbelieving expression.

The space she had enchanted with her magic was not small.

It was large enough to encompass an entire corner of the forest.

Jefrin had engraved magic into the ground of that vast area.

Now, Astina was destroying it all.

Jefrin's spell wasn't an illusion.

It was a spell that caused every living being in the area to suffer the same damage if someone attacked her.

A magic circle created with the help of necromancy.

She had added the illusion of cold to confuse her opponents.

Her plan was to force them into a desperate situation, making them kill her and die alongside.

Of course, this wasn't her only preparation.

She had anticipated that if the opponents remained calm, they might dispel the magic in this area.

Therefore, she had used various tricks to deceive them.

But all that was futile against overwhelming power.

Even though she had prepared multiple contingencies to prevent the dispelling of her magic, destroying the very ground where the magic was inscribed left her no room to maneuver.

'I can’t let it end like this… '

Jefrin controlled her mana.

She began to release the time magic Aryandor had cast on her.

The time magic had made her younger in exchange for continuously consuming her mana.

That was why Jefrin, once a great wizard, couldn't exert her full power.

As Jefrin slightly released the time magic, she appeared more mature than her current form.

If the original Jefrin was a teenage girl, now she looked more like a woman in her thirties.

'The mana is returning.'

Feeling the increase in her mana, Jefrin immediately directed it towards Astina.

Flames formed around and flew towards Astina.

However, the attack didn’t reach its target.

"Priscilla."

At Rudy's command, Priscilla stepped forward.

Priscilla created an ice wall, shielding them.

Jefrin's magic was effortlessly blocked by Priscilla’s simple action.

But Jefrin did not give up.

"You brats…"

Jefrin moved her body directly.

She surrounded herself with illusion magic, splitting into dozens of figures.

Then, she rushed towards them.

Rudy watched Jefrin's approach and casually gestured.

Following his cue, Priscilla created ice spears that flew towards the charging Jefrin.

Even though she had split into dozens, Priscilla targeted all the approaching figures.

"Argh…!"

Jefrin twisted her body to dodge the ice spears.

The illusions she created with her magic also moved as much as they could, but not all could evade.

The illusions hit by the ice spears vanished with a blur of smoke.

The dozens of illusions were now reduced to half, and as Priscilla moved again, another half disappeared.

"Invisible…"

This time, Jefrin used an invisibility spell.

Jefrin blurred her form, hiding her presence.

Then Rudy closed his eyes.

'What's happening?'

Jefrin looked puzzled as Rudy suddenly closed his eyes.

She attempted to rush at Rudy.

"Priscilla, over there."

As Jefrin prepared to charge, Rudy accurately pointed to her location.

Priscilla launched ice towards where Rudy pointed.

'How did he know?'

Despite being invisible, Rudy had precisely located her.

Jefrin gritted her teeth and dodged the incoming ice spears.

She couldn't approach.

Nor did her magic seem effective.

The fact that Astina and Rudy were holding hands was also a problem.

She couldn’t create confusion by making them fight each other.

To deceive with illusion magic, the environment had to be right, but the environment she had prepared was already destroyed by Astina.

Using instant illusion magic at this point would only momentarily deceive the opponents without being truly effective.

'Beaten by mere brats… '

Jefrin's appearance began to change.

From a woman in her 30s to her 40s, then to her 50s.

Wrinkles deepened on her face, and her back bent.

She was reverting to her original appearance.

The mana had returned, but her movements became more difficult.

"You… brats…”

Jefrin shouted with all her might, but her voice was frail and cracked.

She gasped for air and collapsed to the ground.

The surroundings were a mess.

The altar where Jefrin stood had crumbled, and the ground was split, making it hard to find a solid footing.

"Hoo…”

As the situation seemed to conclude, Astina stopped her magic.

Rudy, still holding Astina's hand, walked forward.

"That's enough, Jefrin. Surrender, and we can spare your life."

“…My life?"

Jefrin laughed hollowly at Rudy's words.

"If you spare me, what will you do? Ask about the rebels?"

Rudy didn’t respond directly.

Jefrin had lived as long as she could.

She had far exceeded the average lifespan.

Of course, she feared death.

More precisely, she feared what would happen after death.

Jefrin's first life, as a wizard, was a failure.

Far from surpassing Levian, she ended up alone and abandoned by the empire.

Although praised as a great wizard, it was a life devoid of meaning.

But Jefrin's second life was different.

She lived to the fullest as a rebel, helping Aryandor.

This life was much more valuable than her decades as the empire's wizard.

Following the rebels' ideology, she killed corrupt nobles and helped the commoners beneath them.

She had taken many lives, but she also saved many.

She witnessed those saved by her actions.

Their lives became peaceful and prosperous.

Gratitude filled the air, ringing in her ears with heartfelt thanks.

The sincere appreciation of the people resonated deeply within Jefrin, giving her a new purpose.

‘It's a pity I won't see such a world.’

It was a world she had longed to see.

But, what truly frightened her was not missing out on that world, but the possibility of it never coming to pass.

Jefrin had seen people striving to create that world, reminiscent of how she had once strived to surpass Levian.

Having failed once, she knew too well the weight of their potential failure.

“There are things scarier than death.”

At her words, Rudy and Astina's expressions hardened.

Jefrin laughed at Rudy's face, manipulating her mana.

Her body aged rapidly.

“Urgh…”

Rudy's eyes widened in shock.

“Priscilla! Block it!”

Priscilla moved swiftly, trying to freeze Jefrin in her tracks.

Jefrin began to freeze from her toes upwards, yet she laughed.

“Such things… cannot stop me. Urgh…”

Blood spilled from Jefrin's mouth.

Her mana became tumultuous.

Not self-aware, but she let go of the controlled mana, letting it rage wildly.

Rudy recognized the phenomenon.

A mana explosion from black magic.

A phenomenon where magic fails and mana becomes uncontrollable.

Jefrin had deliberately triggered this event.

Rudy moved his mana, knowing he had to act.

“Finger of the Demon.”

Thud—

“Ah…”

Rudy's magic pierced Jefrin's abdomen.

It didn't kill her instantly.

Jefrin looked at the spike that had pierced her, then laughed.

Rumble—

A black circle formed around Jefrin.

It grew larger, engulfing its surroundings.

Quickly, it approached Rudy and Astina.

“We need to escape…”

The speed was too fast to react.

“Hold on tight, Rudy!”

Astina firmly grasped Rudy's hand as they were swept into the black orb.

After being engulfed by the black orb, Rudy opened his eyes.

He saw nothing but darkness.

His body, his hands, even Astina, who was swept away with him, were invisible.

Rudy felt something was wrong and spoke.

‘What's happening?’

His voice didn't reach his ears.

“…?”

No sense was perceptible.

Smell, touch, taste, sight, hearing.

Nothing felt alive.

Rudy pondered slowly.

Jefrin's last actions.

She had deliberately caused her mana to explode.

The only mana rampage I knew of was caused by dark magic, so I had no idea how this one had been triggered.

However, having witnessed Luna's rampage before, I knew what it felt like.

So, what exactly had happened now?

It seemed like magic that blocked senses had been activated, but it was difficult to pinpoint exactly what kind of magic it was.

A blockage of the senses…

No.

Was it something that caused confusion in the senses?

Hallucination magic interfered with a person's senses.

Such magic was indeed possible.

'The problem is how to resolve this… '

I tried to think calmly, but a strange feeling began to overwhelm me.

Not feeling any senses at all was enough to make one anxious.

Just a few hours in this state could drive a person mad.

Being able to think meant… could I still use magic?

I tried to mobilize mana.

I felt the flow of mana within my body.

Feeling the movement of mana calmed me a bit, as I had felt nothing else.

'My physical senses are blocked, but my mana isn't… '

I was certain that this phenomenon was caused by hallucination magic.

Hallucination magic interfered with senses, not mana.

The question now was how to escape from here.

I recalled the situation where I was engulfed in a black sphere.

Astina had grabbed my hand and wrapped us in a circle.

So, was I still holding hands with Astina?

I read the flow of mana.

A massive flow of mana was right beside me.

'Astina… '

It seemed like we were lying down together.

'Fortunately, it looks like there's no problem yet… '

Astina's mana was still stable.

She appeared to be calmly assessing the situation.

But that didn't mean I could relax.

'If this is hallucination magic, then it must have a core.'

Escaping hallucination magic involved either breaking or touching its core.

However, that core was likely Jefrin's body.

I slowly expanded my area of mana reading.

As I widened the range, I sensed two mana sources.

One was probably Jefrin, and the other seemed like Priscilla.

'Is the fluctuating mana… Jefrin…?'

One was stable, while the other's mana flow was in disarray.

So, I had to attack the disrupted one.

But I had no way to attack.

The magic I used mostly involved directing it in a specific way.

However, currently, I was lying down, and it wasn't easy to determine that direction.

Normally, I would extend my hand in one direction or visually confirm the exact location before using magic.

If I got the coordinates wrong, I couldn't predict where the magic would go.

Misusing magic could also engulf our bodies in its wake.

'Then… '

I concentrated and quietly said,

'Priscilla.'

At that, Priscilla's voice echoed.

"Rudy, are you okay? I can't feel anything. How about you?"

"Yeah, I can't feel anything either."

Being able to communicate with Priscilla brought me a sense of stability.

I pondered for a moment before speaking.

"Is there a way to solve this?"

"Yes, there's something you need to do."

It was about handling spirits, something I had practiced with Serina.

What we practiced was sharing mental strength.

To share mental strength, I needed to have a proper connection with Priscilla.

Sharing each other's minds.

We could already communicate through thoughts, but we practiced sharing more than that.

We trained to transfer images or information in our heads, but I had never successfully done it before.

However, now it felt like it might work.

With all senses blocked, I felt more connected to Priscilla.

"Transferring information…"

I passed on my thoughts to Priscilla, with whom I was connected.

Like handing over an object.

I focused and transferred the information to Priscilla.

"Huh…?"

"Did it work?"

"…Attack that mana?"

Priscilla had received what I was thinking and spoke my thoughts.

"It seems to be working."

"I can feel it. It's a strange sensation."

"Then, I'll leave it to you."

Priscilla's ability, unlike dark magic which is difficult to handle and has a fixed scale, allowed for fine adjustments.

Priscilla could use ice as if it were her own body.

"Let's try it."

Listening to Priscilla, I moved my body.

I wasn't sure exactly how my body was moving, but I moved as much as I could, feeling the flow of mana.

I moved as close as possible to Astina, who was lying next to me.

Priscilla's attack might spread and reach Astina.

I could withstand the attack to some extent, but Astina couldn't.

So, I tried to cover Astina with my body.

"Here I go, Rudy."

It felt as if Priscilla's body was my own, and I could feel my mana moving.

It was a feeling of unity.

"Ah…"

Is this what it feels like to share mental strength?

I could feel exactly how Priscilla was moving her mana, from the amount to the method.

Priscilla's ice slowly approached in the direction of Jefrin.

"…Stretch out there!"

The ice, moving slowly, stretched out towards the direction of Jefrin's mana.

CHAPTER 202
JEFRIN (8)

It was a dark space.

Nothing could be felt.

Astina slowly pondered in that darkness.

She realized, like Rudy, that this magic was related to hallucinatory phenomena and wondered what to do about it.

As she pondered, she felt a warm heat on her hand.

"Hmm?"

This time, she heard her own voice.

Touch and hearing had returned.

But it wasn't completely back.

It was like the numbness from anesthesia was still partially there.

"Uh…"

As her sense of touch was returning,

Squeeze—

Something was pressing down on Astina's nose.

"…What's this?"

Astina cautiously opened her eyes.

In her blurry vision, she saw a mix of white and gold.

Her sight gradually returned.

"Ah?"

It was Rudy who was pressing on her nose.

"Ah… Ahh…!"

However, the manner in which he was pressing was problematic.

Rudy, with his eyes closed, was lying on top of Astina.

His face was right in front of Astina's eyes.

It was Rudy's nose that had been pressing on hers.

They lay there, noses pressed together in this awkward position.

The situation became awkward due to the prominent hill on Astina's chest.

Rudy's body was lifted slightly because of her chest.

Thus, their noses were touching, and had Astina's chest been smaller, it would have been their lips instead.

"Uh…!"

Astina's face turned red.

Although she often showed a confident senior figure in front of Rudy, she was a girl who knew nothing about men.

"Se… nior."

That's when Rudy opened his mouth.

Rudy's breath touched Astina.

"Ah…”

Not just her face, but Astina's ears also turned red as if they were about to burst.

Even then, she couldn't take her eyes off Rudy's face.

Rudy, still not fully conscious, tossed and turned.

He moved his body to the side, positioning his face next to Astina's head, almost as if embracing her.

“…Just for a moment."

Astina tightly closed her eyes and raised her hand, then hugged Rudy tightly.

"Hmm…”

Astina cleared her throat as if nothing had happened, but she couldn't hide her expression.

Her lips curved into a delighted smile, and her hand gently stroked Rudy's back.

During that brief moment of happiness,

"How long are you planning to stay like this?"

"————!!!!"

Startled by the sudden voice, Astina quickly pushed Rudy away and sprang to her feet.

Standing in front of her was a wolf shining with silver fur.

"Pr… Priscilla?"

"Sorry to interrupt your pleasant time, but we need to clean up, don't we?"

"Pl, pleasant time? I was just trying to make Rudy comfortable after his hard work…”

"That's enough of that. Catch that guy."

Priscilla gestured with her head towards Jefrin.

Astina, her face still red, covered it with her hand and looked in that direction.

Jefrin lay on the grass, aged and defeated.

Surrounded by chunks of ice, her punctured belly was sealed with ice.

"Is she alive?"

"She's breathing, but it doesn't seem like she'll last long."

Astina gazed intently at Jefrin.

She lay sprawled on the ground, aged.

Dust and dirt clung to her body.

"This isn't how she should meet her end, considering all she's done."

Astina approached Jefrin, taking out a small mana stone.

When she brought it to her, her wounds slowly started to heal.

Astina, with a cold gaze, turned to Priscilla, who was looking at Jefrin, and spoke.

"Priscilla, can you check if any professors are nearby? If not, bring them here as quickly as possible."

"Understood."

Astina had no intention of letting Jefrin meet such an end.

Priscilla arrived with Mcguire at the place where Astina was.

Mcguire looked at Jefrin, lying on the ground.

"It seems you were successful."

"Yes, Rudy managed to do it."

Astina greeted Mcguire, laying Rudy on her lap.

"How is Rudy…?"

"His condition doesn't seem too bad. He just hasn't regained consciousness yet."

"That's good to hear."

Mcguire nodded and looked at Jefrin.

"She doesn't look like she'll last much longer."

Jefrin was barely breathing, gasping for air.

"Even if we save her, it won't make much difference. She went into mana overload on her own, so her mind must be half gone."

Mana overload was essentially a suicidal act.

If mana overload is caused by other magic, the body's defense mechanisms provide some protection.

But deliberately causing a mana overload bypasses these mechanisms, damaging not just the mind but the entire body.

Jefrin was, in essence, more dead than alive.

"Still, I don't plan to let her go easily."

The conversation Astina couldn't have in front of Rudy.

The Rebels had invaded the Academy, and Rudy had spoken of the possibility of his death.

Astina had laughed it off then, but she had pondered it deeply.

The Rebels killing her.

It might not happen, but it wasn't something to be ignored.

She had to prepare.

Astina trained to defy fate.

In doing so, she distanced herself from those around her.

She avoided Rudy, whom she cherished.

In another timeline, Rudy had changed for the worse after her death.

To prevent that, Astina distanced herself from Rudy for a while.

Distance in body leads to distance in heart.

She would do her best against the Rebels, but she also had to consider the possibility of not escaping death.

Even if she died, she stepped back to ensure Rudy wouldn't fall apart.

Luna and Rie accompanying Rudy was unavoidable.

Astina, thinking that she would be in their place if she could just survive this ordeal, endured patiently.

She was focused solely on finding a way to oppose the Rebels.

And now.

Astina had formed a definitive plan.

With Jefrin captured, Astina saw a possibility.

The Empire was currently embroiled in internal strife.

The Rebels were active, but not a major concern for the Empire.

For her own protection, the Empire's assistance was essential.

There was something she needed to do to create this situation.

"Then, I leave Rudy in your care."

Astina handed Rudy to Priscilla and lifted Jefrin with magic.

"Astina, where are you going…?"

"I'm heading to the capital."

"The capital?"

Astina pointed at Jefrin and looked at Mcguire.

"I intend to put this woman on the execution block."

Despite it being the time for Jefrin's return, she hadn't shown up, and they learned she had been captured.

The Rebel leaders convened a meeting.

"What do you plan to do, leader?"

"…"

Aryandor held his head in his hands.

The Rebels were unaware of Jefrin's whereabouts.

They knew she was defeated at the Academy, but her movements thereafter were a mystery.

They wondered if she had escaped and searched around the Academy, but to no avail.

"For now, we wait…"

Waiting was all Aryandor could do.

"Leader!!!"

A man suddenly burst into the meeting room.

"There's going to be a public execution in the capital of the Empire…!"

"A public execution?"

"It's… It's Jefrin's public execution…!"

At these words, Aryandor's eyes widened.

"What are you talking about? Jefrin disappeared less than a day ago. It doesn't make sense…"

The Empire generally advocated non-violence.

They upheld the principle of reforming rather than killing.

Of course, many were killed behind the scenes, but to the common people, this was the stance they projected.

Still, a public execution meant extensive deliberation and a compelling reason to proceed.

But it had only been a day since Jefrin's disappearance.

The idea that all these events transpired in such a short time was implausible.

It takes a full day just to travel from the Academy to the capital.

The details of how this unfolded were puzzling.

"Leader, what will you do?"

"…I will go alone."

The Rebels were at a critical juncture.

With their influence spreading, they couldn't afford to spare other leaders.

"Contact Daemon in the capital."

Daemon was currently in the capital due to matters involving the Astria family and the necromancers.

Aryandor planned to meet Daemon, observe the situation, and if an opportunity arose during the execution, attempt to rescue Jefrin.

However…

"Sigh…"

Aryandor arrived in the capital just in time to witness the execution.

Before the execution platform, there was a large crowd.

Public executions weren't a common occurrence, so many had gathered out of curiosity.

On the execution platform, an aged Jefrin knelt, covered in wounds, with Astina standing in front of her.

But that wasn't all.

Beside Astina stood Cromwell and the Empire's Chancellor, Jason Ophillius.

Nearby were Ian Astria and several nobles.

It was a gathering of the Empire's central figures.

The security was too tight for Aryandor to breach alone.

"Leader, have you arrived?"

Daemon, hooded, approached the prearranged meeting spot.

"What's happened here?"

"I heard that during a meeting of the Empire, Astina Persia arrived and brought about this situation."

"Astina?"

"Yes, she brought Jefrin from the Academy to the meeting."

Aryandor gazed at Astina, standing highest amongst the surrounding nobility.

Her presence there among the high nobility implied she had achieved a significant feat.

"That girl captured Jefrin…?"

As Aryandor muttered to himself, the time for the execution arrived.

Astina stepped forward, unfolding a scroll in her hand.

"The accused, a member of the Rebel faction and its leadership, conspired against the Empire's core and committed numerous atrocities. Thus, she is sentenced to death for the crime of national treason."

Her statement was concise and deeply summarized.

Treason was one of the most severely punished crimes in the Empire.

Lengthy explanations were unnecessary.

Astina read the charges and set the scroll down.

She then looked at the crowd in front of her.

"This criminal orchestrated a national rebellion, killing over a hundred people alone."

Astina continued.

"Not only that, but with his magical artifacts and soldiers, she killed countless more. Under the pretext of purging corrupt nobles, thousands of families were destroyed. Some lost sons, others husbands, and still others fathers. Those people were

innocent. They were merely defending their families against the Rebels."

Astina extended her hand.

"To the Rebels listening somewhere, I ask: Do you really believe the world you're trying to create justifies killing innocent people? Can you claim to be better than the corrupt nobles you've killed? Is the world you're building truly ideal?"

Astina had investigated the Rebels to protect herself and those around her.

And she was prepared.

She could explain to the Empire the danger posed by the Rebels and the contradictions in their actions.

She had prepared in advance, seizing this opportunity.

Astina had barely kept Jefrin alive and headed for the Empire.

Instead of a normal carriage, she used magic to fly at high speed and arrived at the Empire.

This challenging journey was to participate in the ongoing conference in the Empire.

Astina attended the conference of the Empire and pleaded the case she had prepared.

She argued that now was not the time for the Emperor's faction and the nobility to fight.

The Rebels were planning to bring down the Empire.

It was not the time to just watch.

As a result, this moment had arrived.

Astina's efforts were not in vain.

Hearing her words, both the nobility and the Emperor's faction resolved to deal with the Rebels first.

"This act will be a declaration of war, a direct confrontation between you, the Rebels, and the Empire. People, do not be deceived by the Rebels sharing a bit of food. They are murderers who killed your families, your neighbors. The bread they give you is made from the flesh of your family, the wine from their blood. These are not goods sprung from the earth. Never forget that."

Astina, with piercing eyes, looked at the crowd and declared.

"Astina Persia…"

Aryandor gritted his teeth as he looked at Astina.

Then he turned his gaze to Jefrin beside her.

Jefrin looked even more haggard and miserable than when he first saw her.

She was practically half-dead already.

As Aryandor watched Jefrin, a soldier standing next to Astina shouted.

"The execution will proceed!"

Hearing this, Aryandor turned away.

Daemon watched Aryandor's reaction.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes."

Aryandor clenched his fist tightly, repeating a name in his mind.

"Astina Persia."

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